

## The Value of Nonsense Words

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Several well-regarded norm-referenced, criterion-based, and informal assessments use nonsense words to test a student’s ability to decode<sup>1</sup>. A number of intervention programs for poor readers also include reading nonsense words as part of the instruction. On occasion, a reading teacher or coach will question us about the value of assessing and teaching nonsense words and ask if any research supports using nonsense words.

### Research about Nonsense Words

Indeed, a large body of research supports the use of nonsense words. Virtually all research around nonsense words focuses on their value in assessing a student’s decoding abilities<sup>2</sup>. The conclusion of a number of studies is that “Compared with other reading subskills, such as vocabulary and verbal memory, pseudoword<sup>3</sup> decoding is the best single predictor of word identification for poor and normal readers” (Ravthorn, N., 2004). Furthermore, according to a number of studies, the most reliable indicator of reading disabilities is – you guessed it – nonsense word reading (Ravthorn, N., 2004; Stanovich, 2000).

Nonsense words are used to assess word-reading skills because they are, by definition, unfamiliar. To accurately decode nonsense words, readers must apply an understanding of phonics patterns for letters or letter clusters. That means the reader cannot use meaning or visual memory to read nonsense words, and reading a nonsense word correctly by guessing is unlikely. Therefore, reading nonsense words may uncover decoding deficits that are not evident when students read grade-level word lists or other real words, whether in lists or in context.

Research has revealed that the characteristics of nonsense words affect their ease of reading and, thus, their ability to identify decoding deficits (Rack et al., 1992; Ravthorn, N., 2004; Treiman, Goswami, & Bruck, 1990). For example, when nonsense words have onset-rime patterns that are visually similar to common real words (*nat, guck, hust, zake, leet*), readers are less likely to misread them than when letters form a pronounceable word that is not similar to the onset-rime pattern of common real words (*muz, blod, thunz, reag*). It is

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<sup>1</sup> Examples are: (1) norm-referenced tests – *Wechsler Individual Achievement Test*, *Woodcock Johnson Tests of Achievement*, and the *Test of Word Reading Efficiency (TOWRE)*, which is a fluency measure; (2) informal assessments – *Fox in a Box* and *CORE Phonics Survey*; and (3) criterion measures – *AIMSweb Nonsense Word Fluency* and *DIBELS Nonsense Word Fluency*.

<sup>2</sup> A recent doctoral dissertation (Cardenas, J., 2009) describes a study that compares two similar explicit phonics programs taught in kindergarten. The only difference is that nonsense words were substituted for real words when students read word lists after learning a phonics concept. This study suggests that the inclusion of instruction and practice using nonsense words during phonics instruction is more effective than using real words.

<sup>3</sup> Nonsense words are called by various names. Researchers often use the term *pseudoword* to indicate an invented word spelled in a predictable way. Pseudowords are not part of the English lexicon and, therefore, have no meaning.

also the case that nonsense words that have “word neighbors” with inconsistent pronunciations such as bint (pint, mint) often take longer to read than nonsense words without inconsistent word neighbors (Bauer & Stanovich, 1980). Further, the complexity of nonsense words will affect the relative performance of strong and poor readers. Words that are more complex, such as *dolsmip* and *trigferd* will be misread more often than easier words such as *trez* and *gug*.

### Using Nonsense Words as Part of Instruction

The advantage of incorporating nonsense word reading in instruction for younger readers and struggling readers, no matter their age, can be deduced from the research on assessments. Reading nonsense words provides teachers with another useful means to determine if their learners can apply phonics rules to read familiar and unfamiliar words, with nonsense words serving as the unfamiliar words (Groff, 2003). For this type of informal assessment, students would read both real and nonsense words that contain current and previously taught concepts. For example, after teaching the silent e rule to students who have previously learned the closed syllable/short vowel pattern, the teacher would have students read the following word lists, making sure that students know before reading which words are real and which are nonsense:

<u>Real Words</u>	<u>Nonsense Words</u>
can	dake
bite	blim
cut	det
bit	chone
glob	vide
shine	sлом
cane	chon
kit	blime
globe	dack
rat	shup
cute	slike
rate	vid
shin	slome
kite	dete

Another reason for including reading nonsense words as part of phonics instruction is to make sure that students can decode words that are not in their vocabularies. Beginning and struggling readers need to understand that they do not have to know the meaning of every word they read. They need to be confident that when they encounter an unfamiliar word, they can decode it, even if it has no meaning to them. Reading nonsense words based on phonics patterns keeps students from developing the habit of turning every unknown word they encounter into a real word.

Reading nonsense words also prepares students to decode unfamiliar multisyllabic words. A student who can decode the nonsense words *e*, *las*, and *tic* can read the word *elastic*, even if the word is unfamiliar.

For older students, reading nonsense words can help them break the habit of guessing words based on what they expect them to be, rather than relying on all the letters to decode words. Anyone who has taught older struggling readers knows how difficult breaking the guessing habit can be. Reading lists of nonsense words helps older students' brains stop guessing because students know the words make no sense and, therefore, they have to sound out the word using what they have learned about phonics.

### Using Nonsense Words as Informal Classroom Assessment

Analyzing student errors in a well-constructed informal assessment that includes reading nonsense words can have great value. Error analysis will show the teacher specific phonics concepts that the student finds confusing. For example, if the student read the list of nonsense words above with all long vowel sounds, we know that he was not applying phonics when reading. Most likely the student was reading long vowel sounds because that was the focus of the most recent lesson. With that knowledge, we could focus on teaching that the vowel sound can be accurately determined by the spelling of the word. Lessons would include having the students practice reading real and nonsense words with the short vowel and vowel-consonant-e spelling patterns.

We have assessed many students using real and nonsense words. Sometimes reading only real words informs us of the student's specific confusion. However, more often, especially for older students, reading nonsense words pinpoints the area of confusion more precisely because many of the real words have become part of the student's stock of sight words.

Nonsense word reading can be an especially useful tool when teaching students who are studying advanced phonics. Analyzing errors in nonsense words with vowel team and r-controlled vowel spellings will easily identify specific patterns that are confusing the students. An interesting comparison occurs when students read real and nonsense multisyllable words with similar syllable patterns (e.g., *fantastic* and *lunradzic*). It is not unusual for a student to read all real words correctly and to misread most or all of the similarly constructed nonsense words. This type of information is invaluable in grouping students according to similar decoding weaknesses and planning instruction targeted at the students' specific weaknesses.

### Summary

The use of nonsense words for assessment has been validated in a large body of research. Researchers are beginning to look at the effects of using nonsense words during phonics instruction. Reading nonsense words is particularly useful to teachers for diagnosing phonics strengths and weaknesses for students of all ages. This diagnostic assessment allows for focused instruction that will move those students toward accurate, effective, and efficient reading. Students also benefit from practice reading nonsense words because they learn to avoid the guessing habit when encountering an unfamiliar word.

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