Foundational Facts

Nonsense Words

Nonsense words are, **primarily**, an assessment tool used to determine if students are able to apply foundational phonetic skills to novel, unknown words. These phonemes, typically closed syllable CVC words, have no meaning in the English language and, therefore, aren't readily recognized by an early reader. The teacher is able to cleanly assess the student's ability to apply decoding/recoding skills to unfamiliar words– a critical early reading skill.

Occasionally, nonsense words may be used instructionally in blending board activities (Orton Gillingham protocol) or while teaching syllabification rules for decoding multisyllabic words. Instructionally, nonsense words allow for isolation of the decoding skill from other tools students might use when reading an unknown word such as word shape or visual memory.

During Assessment

Assessing nonsense words provides information on how well a student decodes common letter sounds and recodes sounds into phonemes.

During Instruction

Deliberate use of nonsense words allows for laser focus on a specific phonics decoding skill or syllabification **with teacher support** to mitigate any confusion of psuedowords.

Good Idea

Blending Boards– manipulating sounds to practice a skill



Caution

Nonsense words should **never** be used as an independent practice opportunity for students at home or at school.



Not So Great

Nonsense words on focus boards

Sheets of nonsense words for practice

Misuse of Nonsense Words Can Lead to…

- Confusion for struggling readers who spend a tremendous amount of cognitive energy decoding. Nonsense words deprive struggling readers of the self-reinforcing step of word recognition and confirmation of success while reading.
- Confusion for language learners who are trying to make sense in a new language. Language learners are already having to learn new vocabulary and for some, new sounds. Misuse of nonsense words just makes that process more difficult.
- Interference with assessment validity. If we allow students to practice nonsense words daily then the pool of novel words becomes smaller- leading to the question did the student genuinely decode/recode the word efficiently or was it a word in visual memory that was practiced previously?

So we should provide…

- Struggling readers a variety of daily opportunities to read connected text that utilizes skills that are familiar and/or newly acquired. Phrase sheets and decodable readers are great tools.
- English learners a variety of daily opportunities to read decodable text and/or text that encourages rich vocabulary development.
- All early readers a variety of daily opportunities to read and explore both decodable connected text as well as grade level text that supports content knowledge and grade level reading competencies.