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Divide and Conquer: Syllabication Assessment and Older Students

Jbernard P. Floriani*

John T. Wolinski†

*Dover, Delaware

†Salisbury State College

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Divide and Conquer: Syllabication Assessment and Older Students

Jbernard P. Floriani and John T. Wolinski

Abstract

The authors describe the development of an informal syllabication instrument which has been useful in determining strengths and weaknesses of secondary students' word attack ability.

DIVIDE AND CONQUER: SYLLABICATION ASSESSMENT AND OLDER STUDENTS

Bernard P. Floriani

STATE SUPERVISOR OF READING, DOVER, DELAWARE

John T. Wolinski

SALISBURY STATE COLLEGE, SALISBURY, MARYLAND

The teaching of reading, if it is to be effective, depends upon skillful assessment in order to determine a student's specific strengths and weaknesses. To make this possible, reading specialists must have at their disposal a variety of formal and informal measures which tap comprehension, vocabulary, rate, and word recognition abilities. However, as Ahrendt (1975) suggested, one of the major problems of the secondary reading specialist is the lack of a variety of standardized and informal diagnostic tests.

Because many disabled secondary students lack consistency in applying word attack skills to unfamiliar words, there are occasions in which it is necessary to determine these students' ability to use syllabication as an aid for accurate word recognition. Durkin (1976) states that "once a context has been scrutinized for possible help with an identification, the next step in attempting to decode a totally unfamiliar word is to consider its likely syllabication." And, in similar fashion, Kottmeyer (1974) has recommended that "it is evident that most pupils who do not subconsciously or intuitively develop their own generalizations will profit from instruction in methods of syllabication."

It should be noted that the authors are acutely aware of the present controversy concerning the usefulness of teaching syllabication generalizations (Johnson and Merryman, 1971; Zuck, 1974; Canney and Schreiner, 1977). The position taken here is that, despite their imperfections, certain generalizations can be exceedingly useful aids for students to recognize unfamiliar polysyllabic words, particularly if they are applied judiciously and with flexibility. The primary justification for teaching syllabication generalizations with acceptably high degrees of utility is to provide the reader with additional tools to recognize hundreds of words that fit those patterns, thus giving him valuable tools for working out words independently (Cooper and McGuire, 1973). Most secondary students with minimal reading skills (6th grade and lower) do not have the required repertoire of word attack skills which allow them to attack unfamiliar words and consequently, are

prevented from comprehending printed materials which are appropriate for their grade level placement. As such, these readers have an inconsistent method of word attack--they do an adequate job with beginning portions of words and "bumble" or "mumble" through longer, more intimidating words (Floriani, 1979).

With this recognition, the authors describe the development of an informal syllabication instrument which has been useful in determining strengths and weaknesses of secondary students' word attack ability.

Test Development

One test that has proven useful for assessing syllabication skills has been the syllabication subtest of the Silent Reading Diagnostic Test (Bond, Balow, and Hoyt, 1970), hereafter abbreviated SRDT. This subtest has been especially helpful since each test item is keyed to one of six syllabication generalizations that have been found to have high utility. However, based upon past observations, particularly of secondary students' performance on the syllabication subtest of the SRDT, their true word analysis skills seemed to be disguised by their familiarity with frequently occurring words (that is, with words appearing in a test that was intended for students in the intermediate grades). Consequently, it seemed necessary to examine the respective grade level equivalents of the words which appear on the SRDT syllabication subtest. Based on the EDL Core Vocabularies in Reading Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies (Taylor, et al., 1979), it was found that at least 60% of these words were sixth grade or below. With the majority of these words lacking an appropriate degree of difficulty, they do not allow older students to demonstrate their true syllabication abilities.

Because of this inadequacy, it was necessary to develop a syllabication instrument that was sensitive to a more mature reader in terms of grade level and experience. To achieve the desired sensitivity, words were selected for consideration on the basis of difficulty ranging from grade nine to grade thirteen. In order to select words within this range, words were examined and sampled using the EDL Core Vocabularies (Taylor, 1979). The specific word selection procedures were as follows:

1. Words, in the grade nine to grade thirteen range, were examined and placed into categories according to five syllabication generalizations thought to have the highest utility (Burmeister, 1978; Emans, 1967; Bailey, 1967). These generalizations included a) divide between compound words, e.g., heirloom; b) divide between double consonants, e.g., squander; c) divide before the consonant in the VCV pattern, e.g., robust;

d) prefixes and suffixes form separate syllables, e.g., reclaim; and, e) consonant plus -le forms a separate syllable, e.g., foible.

2. All words that fit into two or more categories and had to be divided through the use of a combination of generalizations were eliminated, e.g., conversation.

3. Five words from each category were selected at random. Care was taken to ensure, as closely as possible, an equal distribution of words between grades nine and thirteen.

4. Words were listed in a format similar to that used in the syllabication section of the SRDT.

The Delaware Syllabication Survey appears at the end of this article. Readers have the authors' permission to reproduce and use as needed. As with the SRDT, each test item is keyed to a syllabication generalization. These include:

1. Compound generalization, items 5, 7, 13, 17, and 18
2. VCCV generalization, items 2, 10, 15, 20, and 25
3. VCV generalization, items 3, 6, 16, 21, and 24
4. Prefix-suffix generalization, items 4, 9, 12, 14, and 22
5. C + le generalization, items 1, 8, 11, 19, and 23

As is recommended in the SRDT, if a student correctly answers three of five items, it is suggested that review of that generalization is advisable. Fewer than three correct answers indicate an apparent need for additional instruction on that particular generalization. If a student correctly answers four out of five items for a given generalization, one may assume that he has a working knowledge of that generalization.

Because there is little evidence to demonstrate that a reader's ability to divide words on paper necessarily reflects his/her ability to pronounce the words, additional significant information can be gained by asking students to pronounce choices which they have marked. Pronouncing "stī-pend" as "sti-pend", for example, would illustrate a student's inability to see the vowel in an open syllable as having a long vowel sound.

Obviously, no test provides an absolute measure of a student's performance. The Delaware Syllabication Survey is no exception. It is informal in nature and was developed out of a need for a more sensitive instrument for use with secondary students with less than adequate word attack skills. The survey has frequently

been used with secondary students and has the following advantages: 1) the test items allow the students to demonstrate their knowledge of syllabication with words that correspond more closely to their age and school experiences; 2) the survey allows the reading specialist to pinpoint areas of strength and weakness since each item is keyed to a specific syllabication generalization; 3) the survey allows for the assessment of student application of vowel generalizations to syllabication generalizations with acceptably high utility; and, 4) the survey can be used in both individual and group assessment.

Delaware Syllabication Survey
(Grade 7 and Above)

Directions: Look at the first word in each row. Then find one that is correctly divided into syllables. Mark the circle in front of it.

Example:	asset	<input type="radio"/> ass-et	<input checked="" type="radio"/> as-set	<input type="radio"/> a-sset
<hr/>				
1.	wrangle	<input type="radio"/> wrang-le	<input checked="" type="radio"/> wran-gle	<input type="radio"/> wra-ngle
2.	curtail	<input checked="" type="radio"/> cur-tail	<input type="radio"/> curt-ail	<input type="radio"/> cu-rtail
3.	stipend	<input checked="" type="radio"/> sti-pend	<input type="radio"/> stip-end	<input type="radio"/> stipe-nd
4.	onslaught	<input type="radio"/> onsla-ught	<input type="radio"/> ons-laught	<input checked="" type="radio"/> on-slaught
5.	forgo	<input type="radio"/> forg-o	<input checked="" type="radio"/> for-go	<input type="radio"/> f-or-go
6.	caucus	<input checked="" type="radio"/> cau-cus	<input type="radio"/> cauc-us	<input type="radio"/> ca-uc-us
7.	spendthrift	<input type="radio"/> spe-nd-thrift	<input checked="" type="radio"/> spend-thrift	<input type="radio"/> sp-end-thrift
8.	dwindle	<input checked="" type="radio"/> dwin-dle	<input type="radio"/> dwind-le	<input type="radio"/> dwi-n-dle
9.	beguile	<input type="radio"/> beg-uile	<input type="radio"/> begu-ile	<input checked="" type="radio"/> be-guile
10.	squander	<input type="radio"/> squa-nder	<input checked="" type="radio"/> squan-der	<input type="radio"/> sq-u-an-der
11.	supple	<input checked="" type="radio"/> sup-ple	<input type="radio"/> supp-le	<input type="radio"/> su-p-ple
12.	reclaim	<input type="radio"/> rec-laim	<input checked="" type="radio"/> re-claim	<input type="radio"/> recl-aim
13.	heirloom	<input type="radio"/> he-ir-loom	<input checked="" type="radio"/> heir-loom	<input type="radio"/> heirl-oom
14.	chronic	<input type="radio"/> chro-nic	<input type="radio"/> chr-on-ic	<input checked="" type="radio"/> chron-ic
15.	languish	<input type="radio"/> lang-uish	<input type="radio"/> lan-gu-ish	<input checked="" type="radio"/> lan-guish
16.	bogus	<input checked="" type="radio"/> bo-gus	<input type="radio"/> bog-us	<input type="radio"/> bogu-s
17.	namesake	<input checked="" type="radio"/> name-sake	<input type="radio"/> nam-es-ake	<input type="radio"/> nam-e-sake
18.	scapegoat	<input type="radio"/> scap-eg-oat	<input checked="" type="radio"/> scape-goat	<input type="radio"/> sca-pe-goat
19.	foible	<input type="radio"/> fo-ible	<input type="radio"/> foib-le	<input checked="" type="radio"/> foi-ble

20. maudlin	∅ maud-lin	0 mau-dlin	0 maudl-in
21 feline	0 fel-ine	0 feli-ne	∅ fe-line
22. caption	0 capt-ion	∅ cap-tion	0 cap-ti-on
23. scruple	∅ scru-ple	0 scr-uple	0 scrup-le
24. robust	0 rob-ust	0 r-ob-ust	∅ ro-bust
25. fervor	0 ferv-or	∅ fer-vor	0 fervo-r

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