Divide and Conquer: Syllabication Assessment and Older Students

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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 subsconsciously 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 syl-
labication skills has been the syllabication subtest
of the Silent Reading Diagnostic Test (Bond, Balow,
and Hoyt, 1970), hereafter abbreviated SRDT. This sub-
test 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 oc-
curring 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 diffi-
culty 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 syl-
> labication generalizations thought to have the highest utility
> (Burmeister, 1978; Emans, 1967; Bailey, 1967). These general-
> izations 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 "stĭ-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   0 ass-et   ⊠ as-set   0 a-sset

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1. wrangle	0 wrang-le	⊠ wran-gle	0 wra-ngle
2. curtail	⊠ cur-tail	0 curt-ail	0 cu-rtail
3. stipend	⊠ sti-pend	0 stip-end	0 stipe-nd
4. onslaught	0 onsla-ught	0 ons-laught	⊠ on-slaught
5. forgo	0 forg-o	⊠ for-go	0 f-or-go
6. caucus	⊠ cau-cus	0 cauc-us	0 ca-uc-us
7. spendthrift	0 spe-nd-thrift	⊠ spend-thrift	0 sp-end-thrift
8. dwindle	⊠ dwin-dle	0 dwind-le	0 dwi-n-dle
9. beguile	0 beg-uile	0 begu-ile	⊠ be-guile
10. squander	0 squa-nder	⊠ squan-der	0 sq-uan-der
11. supple	⊠ sup-ple	0 supp-le	0 su-p-ple
12. reclaim	0 rec-laim	⊠ re-claim	0 recl-aim
13. heirloom	0 he-ir-loom	⊠ heir-loom	0 heirl-oom
14. chronic	0 chro-nic	0 chr-on-ic	⊠ chron-ic
15. languish	0 lang-uish	0 lan-gu-ish	⊠ lan-guish
16. bogus	⊠ bo-gus	0 bog-us	0 bogu-s
17. namesake	⊠ name-sake	0 nam-es-ake	0 nam-e-sake
18. scapegoat	0 scap-eg-oat	⊠ scape-goat	0 sca-pe-goat
19. foible	0 fo-ible	0 foib-le	⊠ foi-ble

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

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