

7-1-1977

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Recommended Citation

Cunningham, P. M. (1977). Supplying the Missing Links from Consonant Substitution to "Real Reading". *Reading Horizons: A Journal of Literacy and Language Arts*, 17 (4). Retrieved from https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/reading_horizons/vol17/iss4/10

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SUPPLYING THE MISSING LINKS FROM CONSONANT SUBSTITUTION TO "REAL READING"

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Consonant substitution exercises are a common sight in most primary classrooms. Teachers find that beginning readers are quite successful at reading new words when these words are aligned under a rhyming stimulus:

cat
mat
brat
slat.

Unfortunately this facility does not generally transfer when these same words appear in their reading material.

Railsback (1970) questioned the efficiency of consonant substitution as a method of word identification:

The reader must look at the word and decide whether he knows a word from which he changes the beginning or the ending sound. He then must mentally "remove" the sound and substitute the one from the strange word. For no other reason than the excessive amount of time it takes to think of a word that is similar and then to make the substitution, the process cannot be recommended as a word attack procedure. A far more serious weakness in this process, however, is the matter of determining the "known" word that is similar to the "unknown" word. (433)

Railsback also suggested that there is very little commonality between the consonant substitution exercises in which a word is written on the board to serve as the basis of substitution, with the other words written directly under it, and actual reading situations. In actual reading situations, there is no "known" word conveniently placed above the unknown word. The reader must somehow conjure up a mental image of a similar known word.

Griffin (1972) investigated the ability of children to employ initial and final consonant substitution. She stated that in order to employ consonant substitution techniques one must be able to: (1) recall from memory the form of a known word; (2) note similarity in form between the known and unfamiliar word; (3) associate sounds with a few consonant letters; and (4) blend an initial or final consonant sound with the remaining sounds in a word and identify the unfamiliar word.

Ninety second graders were randomly selected and presented with one

syllable simulated words. They were then asked to think of a real word that looked just like the simulated word except for the first letter or to think of a word that looked just like the simulated word except for the last letter. Finally, the subjects were asked to pronounce the simulated word. Griffin concluded that the ability to recall a known word visually similar to a simulated word was significantly associated with the ability to correctly identify one syllable simulated words.

Both Railsback and Griffin concluded that the difficult and crucial task in using consonant substitution as a word identification technique is in recalling a known word visually similar to the unknown word. In the remainder of this article a five-step teaching strategy will be outlined which will help beginning readers to use the words they know to figure out the words they don't know.

Step one: Do consonant substitution exercises as they have traditionally been done. The teacher or students think of a word and then change the initial or final consonant or consonants to produce new words. Students at this stage should develop facility with the consonant letter-sound associations and should verbalize that words which end alike generally rhyme and words that begin alike generally sound alike at the beginning.

Step two: Once the students have developed proficiency at consonant substitution begin to help them move toward recalling a known word visually similar to an unknown word. Give each student three index cards on which they will print three known words (e.g. cat, jump, hop). Whatever words are chosen, each student should have cards containing these same three words. Next, present them with words they are not likely to know and which differ from the three words on their cards in their initial or final consonant or consonants (e.g. bat, brat, chat, cap, cast, bump, stump, jug, chop, crop, hog, hot). Ask the students to find their word which looks most like the displayed word. At a signal from you, have them show their look-alike word. Next, have students compare and contrast the two words. How are they alike? How are they different? Where are they alike? Where are they different? Will they rhyme or begin alike? Finally, have a volunteer pronounce both the word on his card and the displayed word.

Continue with this process of choosing a match for an unknown word from a store of known words by increasing the number of words on index cards each day. Two or three words should be added each day until students have a store of from 15 to 20 known words. Practice in matching, comparing, contrasting and pronouncing the known word and the unknown word should be continued until students can accurately and consistently find their look-alike word and pronounce both words.

Step three: By now, students should be able to select from a tangible store of words a match which will help them decode an unknown word. Step three is to move them from a tangible store to a memory store. During this stage, instruction should proceed exactly as described in step two EXCEPT students should be asked to *think* of the word from their store of 15 or 20 which looks most like the unknown word. Students should have their store of 15 or 20 words available but should look through that store only when no

student can think of which word from his store looks most like the presented word. A volunteer should then pronounce the word he has thought of and the unknown word.

Step four: Your students are now almost to the goal of being able to recall a known word visually similar to an unknown word. They can already do this with the 15 or 20 words. Now, challenge them to use all the words they know to figure out words they don't know. Present words in the context of a sentence and ask the students to tell you any words they know which look similar to an unknown word. Be sure they understand at this point that they can use any known words not just the 15 or 20 they have been using. At this stage students should realize that not all visually similar words are pronounced alike and should use the information given by the other words in the sentence to check on the appropriateness of their match. If the look-alike word they have chosen does not result in a word which makes sense in the sentence, another look-alike word should be selected.

Step five: This step is easy but also easily overlooked! Provide for transfer from the practice to "real reading." As children are reading and come upon a word they don't recognize, say, "Do you know a word that looks like that word?" Give children time to read silently during which they write down any unknown words and a look-alike word. After the silent reading, these words can be shared with the entire group. Help children verbalize that in reading you can use what you know to figure out what you don't know and that you can check this process by seeing if the resulting message makes sense.

An adaptation of the above procedure was used by the author with a small group of second graders (Cunningham, 1975). The results supported the theory that students' ability to pronounce unknown words increased after practice in comparing the unknown to the known. An investigation is now underway with third and fourth graders in which the strategy described is extended to include polysyllabic words.

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