



William Labov
Linguistics Laboratory
University of Pennsylvania

We all know that the alphabet is the essential tool for achieving literacy in English, but there are many reasons why struggling readers find it hard to use. Some of the problems have to do with the alphabet itself. English has 16 vowels but only 5 letters to record them, so the ideal one-to-one relationship between sound and spelling doesn't operate. There are many useful rules for working out the relations of sound and spelling, but some have become complicated due to changes in the language that took place after the spelling system was established. As a result, we know that even for good readers, it takes about two years longer to learn to read English than languages like Spanish or Hungarian with a simpler system.

Other reasons for the loss of confidence in the alphabet have to do with the special problems of children whose home language is different from classroom English. For them, the relation of the alphabet to speech is even more complicated. There are more silent letters that do not echo in the mind when the reader searches for a word. Some letters jump back and forth and don't appear where the reader expects them to. The letters that occur at the ends of words (grammatical suffixes) don't carry the meaning that the standard language has established. These problems are particularly severe for struggling African-American and Latino readers, but similar problems may be expected for children in most low-income schools.

SPOTLIGHT ON READING is not a complete reading program, but a specialized tool for dealing with the decoding problems of African-American, Latino and other minority children in low income schools. It focuses attention on the small number of sound-to-spelling problems that form the greatest obstacles to progress in reading

SPOTLIGHT makes available to teachers the results of large-scale research on reading programs to guide their instructional efforts in the most efficient manner. SPOTLIGHT can be used to guide such informal programs as Guided Reading, in combination with direct instruction programs like Reading Mastery, to supplement Language Arts programs like Open Court or with its parent program, the Individualized Reading Manual. Though it incorporates the principles of direct instruction, the activities used for instruction have a game-like character that provides the motivation needed for discouraged readers who are alienated from the usual classroom procedures.

The research base

The content and pedagogical approach of Spotlight is the result of ten years of research on the decoding abilities of struggling readers in low income schools. The decoding problems that are the focus of Spotlight have emerged from the results of intervention programs with almost 1,000 children in the 2nd through 5th grades of inner city schools in Philadelphia, Atlanta and Southern California, equally divided among White, African American and Latino children. The identification of reading problems and the approach to reading improvement draw upon three types of research:

- (1) Linguistic analysis of reading errors in a computer-controlled pre- and post-test of the reader's knowledge of graphemic/phonemic relations.
- (2) Sociolinguistic studies of children's home language, in and out of school
- (3) Studies of the relative success of various methods of countering alienation from reading and the school process.

WHEN NOT TO INTERVENE

The fundamental principle of tutoring is to intervene as little as possible. This means that you must learn to distinguish between a difference in pronunciation and a mistake in reading. Some cases are easy. If a student reads *nice and cold* as “nice an’ cold”, no one would suspect a reading error since *an’* is the normal pronunciation for almost everyone. But if a student reads, *a coal stove* as “a col’ stove”, it is hard to tell if it is an error or not, especially if the student seems to be reading one word at a time. Here is where tutoring becomes an art. The tutor must learn to sense from the reading of the following text whether the student is on the right track, and if not, pose questions about the meaning that will show whether he or she has the right meaning in mind.

WHAT IS HARD ABOUT THE ENGLISH ALPHABET?

Reading research has established that an essential factor in learning to read efficiently is *phonemic awareness*, the understanding that individual letters represent individual sounds. In English, this basic alphabetic principle is absolutely clear for single consonants at the beginning of words. Whenever we encounter a single consonant letter at the beginning of a word (*bat, bit, sat, seat, root, loot, wide, yard*), we can be quite sure that it has a simple and constant relation to sound. (Of course this concept of a “single consonant” requires an idea of what vowels are: it is a consonant followed by *a, e, i, o* or *u*, but children are always presented first with words of the CVC type: *bat, rat, cat, sat*, etc.) Here the letter *b*- always has the sound of /b/, and for all children, the classroom English sound is pretty much the same as the one they produce themselves. Even struggling readers who are 2 years behind in the third grade have mastered the alphabetic principle: they get this first single consonant right 96% of the time!

The chief obstacle to reading success in the early grades is not then a failure to master the alphabetic principle, but rather an inability to deal with the combinatorial relations of sound and spelling. These are the cases where several letters have one sound (digraphs, vowel pairs), or one letter represents several different sounds (single vowels) or several letters and sounds are piled up together (consonant clusters). Some of these many-to-one relations are easy, like *-ck* for final /k/ after stressed short vowels. Struggling readers usually handle this very well. But others prove to be especially hard. These are the problems that SPOTLIGHT is aimed at.

Ten spotlighted decoding problems

CONSONANTS

(1) THE SOFT-C RULE

The regularity of initial single consonants has one glaring exception: the letter *c*, which sometimes represents the sound of /k/ (“hard *c*”) and sometimes the sound of /s/ (“soft *c*”). But the rule is very simple: read *c* as /s/ before the letters *i, e, y* and elsewhere

as /k/. But the vast majority of struggling readers are not aware of this, and coming to a word they do not know by sight are most likely to use the default value /k/. Thus *certainly* is typically read as “kert—kertain—kertains..” but without a command of the soft-*c* rule there is little hope for a successful decoding.

Since *c* is such a striking exception to the regularity of single first consonants, it is important that children learn how it works if they are to maintain confidence in the alphabet.

It is interesting to note that children who have learned to read in Spanish first apply the soft-*c* rule in English without instruction. But African-American and White struggling readers will continue with wrong /k/ reading for years unless they are given the help they need to recognize this simple and consistent rule of the English alphabet



C-SERPENT

(2) DIGRAPHS

The alphabet doesn't have enough letters to represent all the sounds of English, so some sounds are indicated by two letters. So some words that have only one consonant at the beginning still have to start with two letters. The favorite second letter is *h*, since it doesn't occur as a second sound itself. So *th-* stands for the soft fricative sound we make with the tongue between the teeth, *sh-* for the fricative sound we make with the tongue against the hard palate, as in *shoe*, and *ch-* for the more abrupt palatal sound in *chew*. To deal with these digraphs, the beginning reader has to unlearn the simple and useful alphabetic principle of one letter to one sound, and pay attention to the second letter as well.

Without instruction on digraphs, struggling readers will make many more errors with words of this type than with words like *cat*. The situation is complicated for African-American readers by the fact that in African-American Vernacular English [AAVE], the sound indicated by *th-* isn't heard at the end of words. Instead, words spelled with final *-th* have the sound of /f/. Since *death* and *deaf* sound the same to speakers of AAVE, teachers are best advised not to confuse children by insisting that they are different.

Digraphs are particularly difficult for many Latino children for whom *ch-* and *sh-* are generally interchangeable (and for whom *Chucky Cheese* can be *Shucky Sheeze*). For the reading teacher who is not to be distracted by problems of pronunciation, it will be important to decide whether *potato ships* is a Latino pronunciation of *potato chips* or the mistaken idea that potatoes are imported from abroad.

(3) CONSONANT CLUSTERS

As we all know, the syllables of English don't always begin or end with a single consonant sound. We can have two or three at the beginning of a syllable (*spit*, *split*), and two, three, or four at the end (*fist*, *first*, *sixth*, *warmph*). Error rates in decoding increase sharply with each increase in the number of consonants that are clustered at the beginning (the “onset”) and the end (the “coda”) of the syllable. One would think that children who

had mastered the alphabetic principle for *s* and for *p* at 96% would get at least $.96 * .96$ or 92% correct for *sp-* words, but instead we typically find only 60 or 70% correct.



WASPS' NEST

The problems at the ends of words are even more severe, since here the alphabet and the spoken language differ the most. The written forms of *child*, *find*, *test*, *desk*, *kept*, have two consonants at the end, but in speech we often hear only one. This problem is most severe for speakers of AAVE, who use the second consonant much less often than speakers of other dialects, and Latino youth follow in this respect.

Avoid the temptation to train the student to pronounce all these clusters. Learning to read means learning how to get meaning off the printed page. The important thing is to recognize that *missed* means 'miss' in the past. Trying to get your student to pronounce the final sound in *missed* may help call his attention to it, but it is more likely to frustrate and irritate. It confirms the student's suspicion that good readers are children who talk like the teacher. The tutor's job is to figure out whether the student has understood the text, and intervene when there is real evidence of misunderstanding.

(4) UNSTABLE LIQUIDS.

There is a special kind of consonant cluster that causes the most serious kind of problems for struggling readers. When the second letter of an initial cluster is /l/ or /r/, or the first letter of a final cluster is /l/ or /r/, we have an unstable situation. These "liquid" consonants are very hard for readers to locate: are they on one side of the vowel or the other? So the word "flew" is very often read as *fell*, *follow*, *foul*, or *file*. The word "slipped" is often read as *spilt*. Moreover, one liquid consonant will often be converted into another, so "grabbed" may be read as *gobbled*. The *r* in a final cluster may jump to the front, so that "thirst" may be read as *through* or *trust*.



FLIP-FLOP FIEND

The instability of liquid consonants reflects a different kind of instability in speech. In AAVE, as well as other dialects, a final /l/ is often realized as a vowel, without any tongue contact, and from an acoustic point of view, it is very hard to separate the vowel of the nucleus from this l-like vowel. In AAVE, /r/ in an initial cluster often disappears, as in *th'ow*, *th'ough*.

VOWELS

(5) THE SILENT-E RULE.

The most important challenge for the struggling reader who wants to master the vowels of the English alphabet is the silent-e rule. Most early readers have had extensive practice with simple words like *rat*, *sit*, *ran*, *job*, and they may have formulated the unconscious rule that the a single vowel works like a single consonant—it has a single dependable sound. Even if they have been told that sometimes "a" has its own name, they

do not know how to apply this in decoding words like *bite* vs. *bit*, *Jane* vs. *Jan*. The silent-e rule is one of the most reliable features of the English alphabet, but it requires a good understanding of three points:

1. When a single vowel occurs in a word of the C-V-C shape, it is always short. There are no exceptions.
2. When the letter “e” occurs at the end of a word of the C-V-C-e shape, it is not pronounced. There are two exceptions: *Nike*, *café*.
3. When a vowel occurs in the middle of a word of the C-V-C-e shape, it is long (says its own name). There are many exceptions, but they are *all* before the letters “v, m, n”: *give*, *live*, *shove*, *glove*, *love*, *come*, *some*, *one*.

The tutor must give the reader lots of practice in seeing the effect of an added “e”, and also in recognizing the exceptions. It will be helpful for the tutor to know that the reasons for the many exceptions spelled with “o” is that these are all short-*u* words. Twelfth century scribes wrote these “u” sounds as “o” before “v, m, n” because at that time those letters were all written with “u”-like loops which made the word too hard to read. *Glove* was written as *gluue* and *come* as *cuuu*, so by writing the first “u” as an “o” the word became much easier to read.



HATES SILENT-E

(6) THE INVISIBLE “Y” IN REGULAR VOWEL TEAMS.

When vowel letters come two at a time, the first step is obviously to take the easy ones first. No vowel pair is easier than “ee”. It looks like and sounds like what it is, a long “e”. Just the same, struggling readers have trouble with such regular pairs, partly because of a very small number of prominent exceptions, but partly because the reader hasn’t been warned about the big difference between the good ones and the bad ones

There are 18 vowel teams that combine one of the five vowel letters “a,e,i,o,u” with a second vowel letter “a,e,i,o,u” or “y” or “w”. Our purpose here is not to give a complete run-down of them all, but to give a general outline of the problems and how they can be dealt with. Seven of these are perfectly regular—they always have the same sound. Unfortunately, they’re not the most common ones: “oi, oy, oe, ie, uy, ue, au, aw”. There also four common vowel pairs that each have only a single exception: “ai, oa, ee, ew”. You might want to see if you can spot the exceptions before going on:

Vowel team	Exception
ai	_____
oa	_____
ee	_____
ew	_____

You can find the answers at the end of this section.

So far so good. But there is a problem with the alphabet that disturbs this neat situation. *Cue* does not exactly rhyme with *glue* and *few* does not exactly rhyme with *new*. It's the same problem that makes it much harder to apply the silent-e rule to *cub/cube* than to *tub/tube*. In *cue*, *few*, *cube*, there is an invisible "y" before the vowel, not present in the spelling. We also hear it in the name of the letter "u". Originally, this invisible "y" was present for all "u" and "ew", which were always pronounced "yu" just as in the word "you". But that "y" glide has disappeared in North American English in *new*, *dew*, *sue*, *due*, and thousands of other words. There is a simple linguistic rule for this—"y" disappears after consonants pronounced with the tip of the tongue. But as far as the struggling reader is concerned, this doesn't help much. Having learned that "ue" in *cue* has the same sound as *do*, it is disappointing to find that *cue* is not "coo" but "kyoo".



FIERCE FIEND

The vowel team "ie" is regular, but it has different sounds in different places. In the middle of a word, it's always the sound of long *e*, in *fiend*, *fierce*, *brief*, *pier* (exception: *friend*). But at the end of the word, it stands for long *i* in *lie*, *die*, *pie*, (and also *dies*, *pies*, *lied*, etc.). You might also ask yourself, when is the sound of long *i* at the end of the word spelled "ie" and when is it spelled "y"? Consider *lie*, *die*, *pie*, *tie*, *fie*, *hie*, as against *cry*, *spry*, *fly*, *try*, *ply*, *sty*, *sky*. [Exceptions to regular vowel teams: "ai" *said*, *again*; "ee" *been*; "oa" *broad*; "ew", *sew*.]

(7) IRREGULAR VOWEL TEAMS: THE PROBLEM OF UNPREDICTABILITY.

We have seen that ten of the vowel teams can be learned by regular rules, once we get the few exceptions out of the way and find the invisible "y". Of the remaining seven, four have a default value, and can be dealt with by lists of exceptions and subrules. Typical of these are "ie", which has the default value in *brief*, *thief*, *piece*, *fierce*, and a single exception in *sieve*. There is a sub-rule that "ie" has the sound of long *i* at the ends of words (*lie*, *die*, *tie* along with *lies*, *died*, *tieing*). The other tricky part of "ie" is that it can represent two distinct vowels in *quiet*, *diet*, *client*. A good tutor who knows these sub-rules might be able to help a struggling reader recognize these three distinct patterns. The same holds true for "ou", which has its default value in a very large number of words (*house*, *foul*, *out*, *shout*, *found*, etc) but has the sound of long "u" after "y" (*you*, *youth*) and in the three special words *group*, *soup* and *ghoul*, and gets shortened to short *u* in *trouble* and *double*.

A certain amount of success with these semi-regular vowel teams does not prepare the reader for "ei", "ea", "oo", and "ow". Of these, "ow" is the archetypical problem, for it represents the historical collapse of two different historical phonemes that contrasted in most environments. Many readers are introduced to "ow" with *How now*

brown cow but are not as familiar with *The slow crow in the third row*. The painful truth is that both are equally probable.

The reader must learn that there is no way to predict from the spelling “ow” which of the sounds is intended. Instead of following a rule, the reader must learn a *strategy* of trying both possibilities. The key to decoding “ow” is to know that there are just two possible interpretations, and one of them is right. In the Individualized Reading Manual, the reader is taught to recognize one of these sounds as surprise (“oh!”) and other as pain (“ow!”).

(8) THE GHOST LETTERS.

One of the most difficult and challenging features of the English alphabet are the use of the letters “gh” after a vowel to either signal the quality of the vowel or to indicate the consonant /f/. Thus we have

- <i>eigh</i> as long <i>a</i> :	<i>weigh, freight, neighbor, sleigh</i>
final - <i>igh</i> as long <i>i</i> :	<i>high, thigh, sigh,</i>
- <i>igh</i> before <i>t</i> as long <i>i</i> :	<i>might, sight, fright, tight. fight, night. . .</i>
final - <i>gh</i> with <i>ou</i> :	<i>though, through, thorough, bough</i>
past with <i>t</i> as long open <i>o</i> ::	<i>caught, fought, taught, brought, sought, thought . . .</i>
final as /f/	<i>laugh, cough, tough, rough, trough, enough. .</i>

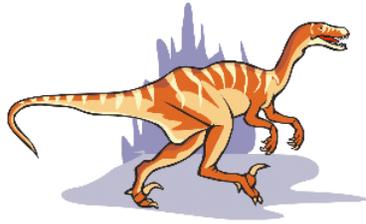
In the Individualized Reading Manual, the letters -*gh* are called the *Ghost Letters* because of their tendency to disappear without a sound after a vowel. Gh- is of course pronounced /g/ at the beginning of the word, as in *ghost*; the problem is always at the ends. There are a number of sub-rules involved here, as well as lexical exceptions, but generalizations may not be helpful. Practice with the most common words is essential for fluent reading..



THE F-GHOST

GRAMMAR

(9) MONSTERS PAST AND PRESENT



Standard English is quite fussy about time: every sentence has to decide whether it is located in the past or the present (or maybe the future). That decision is registered right at the beginning of the predicate: if it is in the present tense, an –s goes on the third singular form of the verb; if it is past, the verb will take an –ed, or show one of the very many irregular past forms like *was* or *gave*. These are fairly important signals of whether the text is dealing with some long finished business or something going on right now. Speakers of AAVE deal with these signals of past and present in different ways. The past –ed is often not pronounced—true for any form of colloquial English but at a much higher rate for AAVE. As a result, you can't usually tell from oral reading whether the reader didn't notice the past tense signal or just didn't pronounce it. The present tense signal –s on the verb has even less standing in AAVE grammar, and we cannot expect to hear very much of this in oral reading. But speakers of this dialect often mix up past and present in ways that are not connected with their speech, reading *don't* for *didn't* or *give* for *gave*. This may have something to do with the fact that unlike standard English, many sentences in AAVE don't have a fixed relation to past, present or future. In any case, many struggling readers need a lot of help in figuring out when whatever is happening is happening.

10. CONTRACTION AND POSSESSION

What to do with the simple apostrophe is a point that baffles many struggling readers. Many writers construct friendly, conversational texts like *I've been down there* without intending to create a problem for the reader. But for many beginning readers, the relation between *I have* and *I've* is not all obvious, and it is easier for them to read *I have* than *I've*.



BOA CONTRACTOR

The situation is doubly complicated for speaker of AAVE. Adults use about equal proportions of *He is my brother*, *He's my brother* and *He my brother*. But kids use less contraction than adults, and some don't even see a connection between *He's* and *He is*. A further complication comes up in reading the possessive in *my mother's house*, which is just about never there in AAVE. Here the 's looks just like contracted form of *is*. So young speakers of AAVE are often confused about the meaning of this 's when it means 'ownership.'