



RESEARCH
REPORT

Decoder Kids

Introduction

Decoder Kids is a decodable readers beginning reading program for Grades K–1 students designed to develop phonics skills through systematic, carefully sequenced instruction. The program offers 90 high-quality fiction and nonfiction books and an accompanying Teacher Guide robust with lesson plans, phonics routines, English language learner strategies, and additional resources. With these easy-to-use materials, educators can provide the foundational support students need to learn essential decoding skills and become confident young readers.

Carefully crafted texts—sixty-five percent decodable or greater—ensure students encounter a high number of words made up of the sounds being taught in the current week or have been previously taught in prior weeks. The remaining words are high-frequency words that are being taught or reviewed. Additional resources include phonemic awareness and phonics games and extension activities, reteaching routines for alternative

approaches when students need further guidance, and high-frequency word cards and letter cards that support interactive learning activities described in the Teacher Guide.

The purpose of this document is to describe the scientific underpinnings for **Decoder Kids** and provide educators with the confidence that they are selecting a program steeped in strong research foundations. This document incorporates historical studies as well as current findings from literacy leaders and recognized researchers. It details how the **Decoder Kids** program incorporates the scientifically-based reading research best practices in word recognition—including both phonics and phonemic awareness—and language comprehension, and the resulting reading comprehension and fluency.



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Foundational Research Basis for Decoder Kids

The Elements of Reading Comprehension

What Is Reading Comprehension?

It is universally accepted that the ultimate purpose of reading is to comprehend. Also widely acknowledged is the notion that comprehension is a complex process. It is neither simple to acquire, nor simple to teach (Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018; Cooper & Kiger, 2009; McCardle, Chhabra, & Kapinus, 2008; National Reading Panel, 2000).

Although subtle nuances exist, reading comprehension can be defined as understanding what is read, remembering what is read, and communicating with others about what is read (Put Reading First, 2001). For Fountas and Pinnell (1996), reading is the construction of meaning; comprehension is the process of reading, not the end product. Dolores Durkin defines reading as “intentional thinking during which meaning is constructed through interactions between text and reader” (as noted in *The National Reading Panel Report*, 2000). McCardle and her colleagues (2008) provide a more in-depth definition, stating comprehension is the ability to understand language at several levels—words, sentences, and how those groupings interact with larger text structures such as paragraphs, chapters, and books; as in Durkin’s findings, reading comprehension occurs as readers interact with text. For Castles and her colleagues (2018), the multiple parts of reading involve identifying the individual words and activating their meanings, making connections within and across sentences, as well as applying background knowledge and making inferences.

The Simple View of Reading

To explain the factors that are central to students’ reading comprehension ability, scientific research strongly supports the equation shown in the Simple View of Reading by Gough and Tunmer (1986) (Farrell, Hunter, Davidson, Osenga, 2019; Nation, 2019). This equation explains the two main elements that impact comprehension: decoding and language comprehension. The Simple View of Reading states:

$$\text{Decoding} \times \text{Language Comprehension} = \text{Reading Comprehension}$$

In other words, learning to read is made up of two key parts: word recognition through decoding and language, or linguistic, comprehension. The decoding and language comprehension skills in conjunction will determine how well the student is able to comprehend a written text. Together, a student’s decoding and language comprehension skills can help teachers predict how well a student comprehends (Farrell et. al., 2019; Baker, Fien, Petscher, Sayko, & Turtura, 2017).

Scarborough’s Reading Rope

Scarborough’s Reading Rope (2001) is a model that adds detail to the Simple View of Reading. The rope has two main strands: word recognition and language comprehension. Each strand is divided into smaller parts.

The Word Recognition strand is made up of:

- Phonological Awareness
- Decoding
- Sight Recognition

The Language Comprehension strand is made up of:

- Background Knowledge
- Vocabulary
- Language Structures
- Verbal Reasoning
- Literacy Knowledge

As skills develop, the strands of the rope become more tightly intertwined. As the parts of the word recognition strand develop and strengthen, reading becomes increasingly automatic. As the parts of the language comprehension strand develop and strengthen, reading becomes increasingly strategic. Eventually, an individual becomes a fluent, skilled reader in which all the strands of the rope are tightly woven together (Scarborough, 2001). As Lambert (2020) summarizes, “as language comprehension and word recognition begin to mesh, reading becomes increasingly strategic and automatic, eventually leading to skilled reading.”

Instructional Best Practices for Word Recognition Skills

Phonological and Phonemic Awareness

Within Word Recognition, Scarborough identifies phonological awareness as one strand. Phonological and phonemic awareness is recognizing and working with the individual sounds that make up a word. Phonological and phonemic awareness instruction “involves teaching children to focus on and manipulate phonemes in spoken syllables and words” (*National Reading Panel*, 2000).

The importance of phonemic awareness in relation to becoming a strong reader is clear. *The National Reading Panel* found that teaching phonemic awareness to children “significantly improves their reading” (2000). Wolf (2007) explains that young learners’ awareness of a word’s phonemes “is both a critical component and an outgrowth of learning to write and learning to read” (p. 99). She continues that young readers

slowly “learn to hear and manipulate the smaller phonemes in syllables and words, and this ability is one of the best predictors of a child’s success in learning to read” (p. 117). Research shows that insufficient phonemic awareness instruction leads to most reading challenges, while conversely, strong phonemic awareness instruction helps minimize many reading challenges (Burkins & Yates, 2021).

Burkins and Yates (2021) address the common misunderstanding that phonemic awareness instruction requires a lot of time and resources. In actuality, effective phonemic awareness instruction is consistent and can take minutes a day. The main tasks they describe, in order of difficulty, are: phoneme blending, phoneme segmentation, phoneme isolation, phoneme discrimination, phoneme deletion, and phoneme substitution. The words used with each activity affect the activity’s difficulty. They conclude that especially in kindergarten and first grade, “it is urgent for

all students to have consistent opportunities to develop, deepen, and apply phoneme-level skills” (p. 46). Blevins agrees that phonemic awareness and alphabet recognition are characteristics of strong phonics instruction. These topics set up young learners with the skills they need to begin reading and writing words (2021).



Decoder Kids starts each lesson with a phonological or phonemic awareness warm-up activity. For the early Kindergarten books in the first six weeks of instruction, this activity uses the alphabet song to reinforce the order of the letters in the alphabet. This warm-up precedes a letter recognition activity for the two or more letters taught that week. Starting in Week 7 of Kindergarten, the phonemic awareness warm-up is an oral activity that connects to the phonics skill students will be studying that week and reviews sounds they have learned in earlier lessons. The activity types include blending phonemes; blending onsets and rimes; recognizing rhyming words; isolating initial, medial, or final sounds; segmenting phonemes; adding and deleting phonemes; substituting phonemes; recognizing, segmenting, counting, and blending syllables; and distinguishing vowel sounds. The teacher first models the activity with a specific word and then guides students to complete the activity with a list of several words. This approach allows for the phonemic awareness concept to be modeled and applied in a meaningful, effective manner.

In addition to the phonemic awareness warm-up activity included with every lesson, the Teacher Guide provides games and activities to extend students’ phonemic awareness learning. These games can be used at any point during the day as a quick, interactive approach to practicing and reviewing phonemic awareness skills.

Decoding Skills: Teaching Phonics Effectively

Phonics is the understanding that systematic and predictable relationships exist between the letters of written language and the sounds of spoken language. Instruction in phonics leads to an understanding of the relationship between letters and sounds (Blevins, 2017; Put Reading First, 2001). Knowing these relationships will help students read familiar words and decode unfamiliar words accurately and automatically (McCardle et. al., 2008; National Reading Panel, 2000). Decoding knowledge provides students with strategies they can use to read words they have seen before as well as words they are encountering for the first time (Baker et. al., 2017). Learning to decode written words using phonics “empowers students with an exponential effect”: once a student knows the sounds that ten letters stand for, the student can decode “350 three-sound words, 4,320 four-sound words, and 21,650 five-sound words” (Ordetx, 2021).

Phonics is essential to any comprehensive approach to the teaching of reading. Phonics instruction is most effective when introduced early and intentionally taught (Put Reading First, 2001). The first step in reading is learning to decode phonetically. As students learn to decode, they develop word recognition. Then, with increased word recognition, students improve their reading fluency. This reading fluency is a key component for reading comprehension—a main goal of early reading instruction (Blevins, 2017). To decode, students use their knowledge of letter-sound correspondence to sound out words in a text. This grapheme-phoneme approach is an efficient way to learn to read (Dehaene, 2013).

Phonics instruction needs to be explicit and teach students to “sound out” words (Armes, 2020). Models have shown that learning to make the connection between printed letters and the sounds they stand for is a gradual process that “is accelerated by explicit instruction” (Seidenberg, 2017). Direct instruction leads to better decoding and word recognition skills. The more students practice decoding and the more exposure to new words they have, the more words they are able to recognize and the easier reading becomes. Blevins (2021) identifies having a clear scope and sequence as a key characteristic of strong phonics instruction; this scope and sequence should be tied closely to the books students read. Blevins (2017) concludes, “Overall instruction must be engaging, thought-provoking, purposeful, and applied” (p. 20).



The focus of **Decoder Kids** is on systematic phonics instruction that follows a defined scope and sequence of skills. The careful organization of the skills allows them to build on each other. The order of the skills closely aligns with the order in which skills are typically taught in Kindergarten and Grade 1 classrooms using a core reading program.

The book-specific lesson plans offer concrete phonics instruction with specific phonics routines that introduce the skill to students in an engaging manner. The teacher begins each phonics lesson with a modeling routine to introduce the sound-spelling correspondence. The instruction then provides students with a succinct definition of the skill. Finally, the class works together to complete a blending activity using a provided list of exemplar words.

Once students have learned about the skill, they apply their knowledge as they read the week’s decodable book(s). The decodable books are at least sixty-five percent decodable, meaning sixty-five percent or more of the words in the text are decodable based on the phonics skills students have learned at that point in the year. The remaining words in the text are high-frequency words that have been explicitly taught as part of the scope and sequence.

The accompanying blackline master for each book provides:

- a student-friendly definition of the skill along with examples
- a Word Detective activity in which students recognize the skill through identifying example words in the book
- an additional skill-related exercise that requires students to further demonstrate their understanding

In addition, concrete phonics instruction specific to English language learners in each lesson plan relates the target phonics skill to the challenges these learners may face, such as sound transfer or pronunciation issues.

Sight Recognition

The third part of the word recognition strand in Scarborough’s Reading Rope (2001) is sight recognition. This skill refers to identifying a word, regardless of whether it is phonetic or non-phonetic. Sight recognition is important to improved automaticity of reading as increased sight recognition means less time is spent on identifying each individual word and more time is spent on understanding what the words mean as a whole (Hennessey, 2021).

High-frequency words are words that appear most often in texts. While some are less decodable, many follow decoding rules (Burkins & Yates, 2021). High-frequency words often become recognizable by sight more quickly than uncommonly used words. Once a reader has learned a word, the word is read as though by sight. Thus, high-frequency words that are encountered often during reading become “sight words” more quickly than less common words (Seidenberg, 2017). The reader may have learned the word initially through decoding, memorization, or another means. However, once the word is recognized quickly, it then becomes a sight word.

A Read/Spell/Write/Extend routine has been shown to be an effective approach in helping students familiarize themselves with new high-frequency words before reading. In this approach, the teacher introduces the word in context and reads the word with students, using segmenting or other strategies. Next, students spell the word and write the word. Finally, they use the word in their own sentence (Blevins, 2021). This routine involves breaking apart the spoken and written words and then putting them back together. This process, called orthographic mapping, is “how the spelling of a word gets locked into long-term memory” (Burkins & Yates, 2021). Sight recognition is a key factor that enables a reader to improve automaticity and move toward strong reading comprehension.



Decoder Kids hones students’ sight recognition skills to students through targeting three to six high-frequency words during each week of instruction. These words are introduced to students using a predictable routine. First, the teacher introduces each word and uses it in context with a sample sentence provided in the lesson plan. Next, students spell the word orally, write the individual word, and finally use the word in their own sentence. During reading, they encounter each of the targeted high-frequency words in the decodable book(s) for that week. They also often demonstrate their understanding of the words in an activity on the book’s accompanying blackline master. Once the words are introduced, they may be used in later books. In this way, students are able to review and apply what they have learned in earlier lessons and improve their automaticity at recognizing these high-frequency words.

In addition, the Teacher Guide supplies teachers with detailed descriptions of high-frequency word games along with the word cards required to play. These games engage students with the high-frequency words in an interactive manner and allow for review and repetition that can lead to automaticity.

Instructional Best Practices for Language Comprehension

What Is Language Comprehension?

Decoding, as covered earlier in this report, is the teachable process that allows for word recognition using the understanding of the relationships between letters and the sounds they stand for (Kahmi, 2007). Language comprehension, on the other hand, is a little more complex as it does not involve a set of rules that can be taught. Language comprehension is “the ability to understand spoken language” (Nation, 2019). Using Scarborough’s Reading Rope model (2001), the parts that make up the language comprehension strand are: background knowledge, vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge.

As young readers acquire strong decoding skills, their language comprehension must be developed. Beyond being able to decode the words on a page, students must know the meanings of the individual words (Baker et. al., 2017). Only then are students able to comprehend a text. Language comprehension skills are assessed through reading aloud a passage to students and having them retell what was read in addition to answering oral questions about the passage. Students with weak language comprehension have difficulties “related to a knowledge domain or to higher order thinking skills such as reasoning, imagining, or interpreting” (Farrell et. al., 2019). Students with strong language comprehension skills have strong content-area knowledge. Often, students with poor decoding skills may comprehend a text well if they have a lot of background knowledge about the subject matter (Kahmi, 2007).



The focus of **Decoder Kids** is on the decoding piece of the Simple View of Reading equation, as described earlier in this report. At the same time, the program incorporates language comprehension support. Each book’s lesson plan includes a Comprehension and Fluency section in which teachers read aloud the text. After reading aloud, students respond to the Think About It questions inside each book, which ask students to retell parts of the book as well as target other higher-order thinking skills, such as inferencing and comparing. Teachers can use students’ responses to these questions to help gauge how well students understood the text that was read aloud. The story or book response questions on the provided blackline masters offer additional insight into students’ comprehension. As appropriate to the level, students respond to the text in a meaningful way to describe an event or concept from the book in the form of drawing, dictating, and/or writing.

In addition, the nonfiction titles in this program cover a range of key science and social studies topics. These engaging informational texts can be used to supplement a science or social studies topic that students may be covering in their curriculum. As a result, **Decoder Kids** introduces students to content-area knowledge and domain-specific vocabulary that will help them improve their language comprehension and reading comprehension in later grades.

Literacy Knowledge: Print Concepts

One part of language comprehension is literacy knowledge. Literacy knowledge includes an understanding of print concepts and genres (Scarborough, 2001).

Young children come to school with varying levels of understanding of print concepts. These concepts often have been introduced at home by parents and caregivers reading aloud to them. Regrettably many children do not have these early literacy experiences and are at risk of falling behind when they enter school. Knowledge of print concepts influences language development, phonemic awareness, phonics, word reading, and reading/writing development, and is an important predictor of beginning reading success (Shanahan & Lonigan, 2013; National Reading Panel, 2000; Morris, 1993; Roberts, 1992).

For this reason, print concepts must be explicitly modeled and taught. In the classroom, these understandings emerge as teachers read aloud to students daily and discuss specific concepts. Young learners must develop clear understandings of print concepts as first steps to reading (Hiebert, Pearson, Taylor, Richardson, & Paris, 2014; Adams, 1990). Some of these concepts are fundamental behaviors including how to hold a book correctly, where to begin reading on a page, and knowing that in English we read print from left to right and from top to bottom. Other print concepts are more challenging to develop. Early on, readers must understand that what is spoken is written and what is written is read.



In **Decoder Kids**, students have daily opportunities to explore the world of print. Teachers read aloud each text at least twice as they read for understanding and reread for fluency. During these read-alouds, they model several of the print concepts cited above. In addition, the Teacher Guide offers instructional support that introduces young learners to the following print concepts:

- tracking the print from left to right and from top to bottom
- differentiating between print and pictures
- recognizing the differences between a letter and a word
- sweeping to the next line
- having the ability to name and understand common punctuation marks
- identifying the title of a book

The Importance of Practicing Fluent Reading

Fluency is the ability to read accurately, quickly, and with expression. Becoming a fluent reader is important because it builds a bridge between word recognition and comprehension (McCardle et. al., 2008; Put Reading First, 2001). When readers are fluent, they are able to focus more on comprehending the text and less on decoding the words.

After examining numerous studies, the authors of *The National Research Council Report* determined that adequate progress in learning to read depends strongly on sufficient practice in reading to achieve fluency with different texts written for different purposes (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Accurate, fluent reading can be broken into three main steps: seeing each letter, producing the sound each letter stands for, and blending the sounds to pronounce the whole word. As readers begin to recognize words more easily through repeated encounters, their fluency gets better. Improved fluency sets up readers for greater comprehension since they cannot understand what they have read if they are unable to decode the words (Baker et. al., 2017). As the National Center on Improving Literacy (2020) summarizes, “Fluency is not an end in itself but a critical gateway to comprehension. Fluent reading frees cognitive resources to process the meaning of what is read.”

Teachers must provide more fluency instruction—and practice—as a part of their daily reading program because attention to research-based fluency instruction can have beneficial effects in the classroom. Researchers note that systematic skill instruction and teacher-guided reading and rereading opportunities are effective (Pressley & Fingeret, 2007). Reading the same text several times in a variety of ways has been shown to positively impact reading comprehension and pronunciation among students (Minero, 2019; Turner, 2010).

In discussing the day-to-day implementation in the classroom, Hicks (2009) provides guidance to educators on how to support effective fluency practices. She encourages teachers to:

- use think-alouds to model what fluency sounds like
- provide a variety of rereading opportunities: partner, echo, choral, shared, and individual
- have available a variety and large number of texts for rereading
- provide quality instruction in decoding and comprehension

The most effective activities for improving fluency include choral reading and partner reading. Both approaches enable less proficient readers to practice their skills without being in the spotlight, which improves their confidence and allows for learning through listening to their peers (Minero, 2019).



In the **Decoder Kids** program, each decodable book’s lesson is designed with multiple readings for enhancing and practicing fluency. In each lesson, students reread the text with a specific focus on a fluency skill, such as pacing, accuracy, intonation, or expression. Students may read aloud with the teacher, with a partner, or whisper-read on their own, depending on ability. These book-specific fluency activities are supported with detailed fluency routines in the Teacher Guide. Covering choral, echo, partner, and whisper reading, these routines are concrete activities teachers can use to provide students with fluency practice as they apply their decoding skills to the decodable book at hand.

Supporting English Language Learners

Students who are English language learners (ELLs) need additional support to develop the foundational literacy skills that all young readers need. Like all students, ELLs must learn to decode the words on a page. Research shows that phonemic awareness and phonics instruction helps these learners build this foundation (Blevins, 2017; Shanahan & Beck, 2006). This instruction needs to be systematic and explicit (Lambert, 2020). One way to help ELLs with phonemic awareness is to model the production of a sound they may not recognize from or produce in their first language. For phonics instruction, effective strategies include hands-on activities as well as assisting students in connecting their first language to English (Robertson, 2009). When a sound in English does not exist in the student's first language, direct instruction of that sound is useful (Shanahan, 2017). Using a "sound-first approach" helps ELLs grasp the sounds in words and then eventually recognize how letters are used to represent the sounds (Lambert, 2020).

Similarly, English language learners benefit from in-depth vocabulary support because they often lack a strong English vocabulary. Effectual vocabulary strategies include pre-teaching vocabulary before reading, providing time to practice using new words, and focusing on cognates to help students connect their first language to English (Robertson, 2009). Blevins (2021) recommends using small-group instruction time with English language learners to focus on selected vocabulary using the following steps: read aloud the word in English and the students' native languages, define the term and act

it out, discuss related words to make connections to existing knowledge, and use pictures to explain the word further.

In addition to pre-teaching vocabulary, reading aloud benefits ELL students the way it does all students. Using and building onto students' existing knowledge helps them succeed (Lambert, 2020). With support, ELLs can use their knowledge of their first language and other tools their teachers provide to become successful young readers.



In each individual **Decoder Kids** lesson plan, English language learner support accompanies the instruction. Most of the ELL support targets phonics and sound transfer difficulties. These ELL activities relate the target phonics skill to a challenge ELL students may face, such as consonant blends or vowel sounds that are not produced in their first language. This ELL instruction guides teachers in understanding why a phonics sound may be difficult for certain ELLs and gives straightforward strategies to use for additional practice.

Other ELL activities focus on vocabulary support. These activities aid teachers in providing direct instruction of vocabulary words and phrases that may act as obstacles for ELLs, including, for example, multiple-meaning words or figurative language. Teachers use pictures and gestures to convey meaning, and they then have students repeat the words and suggest similar words in their native language.

In addition to the ELL support for each decodable book, the Teacher Guide provides additional vocabulary support for previewing the books and unfamiliar words in small-group sessions with ELLs. With the provided ELL support, teachers have the resources they need to assist this group of students with improved decoding, fluency, and reading comprehension.

Summary of Foundational Research Basis

- ✓ Research shows that word recognition and language comprehension are the two components of reading comprehension. The word recognition skills are comprised of phonemic awareness, phonics, and sight recognition. The language comprehension skills are comprised of background knowledge, vocabulary, language structures, verbal reasoning, and literacy knowledge.
- ✓ Phonemic awareness is an essential component of effective instruction and a strong predictor of reading outcomes.
- ✓ Phonics instruction is most effective when it is taught systematically and explicitly in a way that allows for ample practice and review.
- ✓ Sight recognition develops as students encounter common words over and over. High-frequency words are best taught through a specific routine that leads to automaticity.
- ✓ Knowledge of print concepts is an important predictor of beginning reading success.
- ✓ Fluency builds a bridge between word recognition and comprehension, and it is developed through reading aloud frequently.
- ✓ English language learners benefit from direct phonics and vocabulary instruction that builds on their knowledge of their first language.



Decoder Kids is a research-based program that supports teachers with the tools they need to help students learn to decode and grow as readers. The highly decodable books for each week offer application of the decoding skills and high-frequency words, and they provide multiple opportunities for practice and assessment. Teachers introduce letter-sound correspondences in a carefully ordered scope and sequence that progressively builds on the prior weeks' instruction and benefits all students, including the specific learning needs of English language learners.

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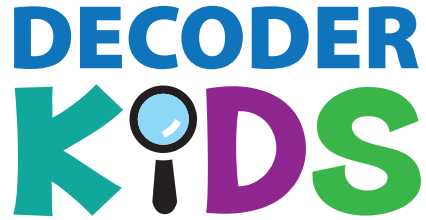
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