

Handout 1: Decodable Texts Versus Leveled Texts

Directions: Read the following excerpt. Annotate for or highlight characteristics of your assigned text type, either decodable or leveled texts.

from “Why a Structured Phonics Program is Effective”

by David Liben and David Paige

In most of these [structured phonics] programs, the words in the texts are restricted to the spelling/sound patterns that have been taught. For example, if short vowel sounds have been taught but long vowel sounds have not been taught, then only short vowel sounds would appear in the texts students read. Similarly, if specific consonant blends (e.g., bl, cr, tr) have been taught, these would appear in the texts, whereas blends that have not yet been taught would not appear. These texts are often called “phonetically controlled readers” or “decodables” because the majority of the words forming the text conform to the letter-sound or phonetic patterns that have been taught up to that point in the program. Phonetic or letter-sound patterns not yet taught do not appear, or appear far less often, hence the term “phonetically controlled.” (5)

In contrast, programs that do not use phonetically controlled readers might use texts that are controlled essentially by every *other* feature of the text: repetition, context, illustrations, shorter sentences, shorter paragraphs, and larger font. Such texts are usually called “leveled readers” or “leveled texts” (since they are placed into complexity levels by this array of text features) or “predictable texts” (since the array of supports makes what happens very predictable and students use this to help read the words). Typically, guided reading programs use these types of texts (6)

Leveled readers for pre-primer or emergent young readers are highly controlled texts, something that is not generally acknowledged or considered. In fact, “controlled text” is a label usually reserved for decodable books, but leveled readers are controlled by repetition, font size, sentence size, sentence patterning, and use of illustrations, predictability and context. Ironically, they are controlled by every feature of text *except* spelling/sound patterns. (7)

By contrast, a phonetically controlled or “decodable” reader would have less repetition, fewer pictures, and be less predictable, since the intent is to ask children to attend carefully to the phonetic patterns they have been learning.

Consider the example below (from CKLA Kindergarten Unit 7 Reader³ ...):

“Pat and Ted had **lunch** with Meg’s tots. Max got **hash** on his chin. Wes got **hash** on his bib. Tim’s milk is on Tom.”

This phonetically controlled text requires the student to focus exclusively on the spelling/sound patterns of the words, words made from the spelling/sound patterns that had been taught. Limited pictures are provided, so students must focus first on decoding as their primary word-solving strategy. In this case, the vowel sounds are all short vowels and the consonant digraphs *sh* and *ch* are bolded to draw attention to this new skill in context. The other words are names

³ CKLA. *Engage NY*. Unit 7 Reader. Retrieved from <https://www.engageny.org/resource/kindergarten-ela-skills-unit-7>.

familiar to students from past readers, as well as high frequency words previously taught by the program (sometimes called Dolch Words, named after the creator of a list of these types of words). These words are taught as whole words that students commit to memory usually without focusing on the letter-sound pattern. (High frequency words often are also called “sight words,” “snap words,” “irregular words,” “tricky words”—different programs use different labels.)

In sum, the major difference between teaching children to learn to read with leveled texts (or “predictables”) vs. phonetically controlled readers (or “decodables”) concerns what we are asking students to do with their attention and effort. With leveled readers, we are asking students to predominately use *context* to learn to read; in phonetically controlled readers, we are asking students to first and foremost use the *spelling/sound patterns* of the English language. When using texts that are not decodable, attention should still be paid to spelling/sound patterns—there is no evidence that students can’t use both as long as proper attention is still paid to these patterns.” (8)

Liben, David, and David Paige. “Why a Structured Phonics Program is Effective,” *Achieve the Core*, <https://achievethecore.org/aligned/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Why-a-Structured-Phonics-Program-is-Effective.pdf>. Accessed 14 June 2019.