

Using Encoding to Support Decoding

While decoding is the act of interpreting the letters of a word with its associated sounds, encoding involves the reverse, as students formulate a word and commit in writing as they think about each letter and sound. Dictation begins in kindergarten with the teacher saying a particular sound and children writing the related letter. Over time, dictation activities involve the teacher saying targeted words that the students write. Dictation occurs as a part of the daily instruction. This supports children both hearing and practicing letter-sound relationships as they write and spell during this focused, guided practice activity (Stahl & Miller, 1989). Consistent with other dimensions of phonics instruction, dictation should be systematic and explicit. The dictated routine can also include the writing of sentences as students develop their skills.

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Second-grade teacher Yvette Hebert has been working with her students on the digraphs /ch/, /sh/, and /th/ for the past few weeks, and her students are learning to consolidate these phonics skills. Her students are equipped with whiteboards and dry erase markers so that they can make corrections more easily.

"We're going to write some sentences that have words using the digraphs we have been learning," Ms. Hebert begins. She conducts a brief review of the targeted digraphs using letter cards, as students repeat the sounds of each with her.

"That's great. You're ready to write! Listen to my word and repeat it with me. *Chip*. He ate a *chip* before dinner. *Chip*."

As the children write, Ms. Hebert circulates to see how each is doing. She notices that Nayeli has written *cip*. "Let's stretch out the sounds: *ch-i-p*," Ms. Hebert says. Nayeli and her teacher each move their hand down one of their arms as they slowly repeat the word in unison. This movement allows Nayeli to both visually and verbally stretch the word. If Nayeli had not mastered the word after this attempt, Ms. Hebert would then have used one finger to tap the three sounds heard in *chip* on her arm. By adding this multisensory approach, children can hear each sound as it is associated with the tap. Nayeli heard her error and then made the correction on her whiteboard. Continuing, Ms. Hebert then asks the children to hold their whiteboards up. She repeats this routine several times, featuring the words *thin*, *shop*, *show*, *chin*, and *three*. The teacher layers instruction throughout, as this is not a spelling test but rather practice for students to encode words. As she reviews, she encourages her students to make the changes they need to any errors, in order to build the habit of self-correction.

"Now's our challenge sentence! Go ahead and clear your boards so we can put some of these words together. Ready? *The shop has three chips*." She reminds her students as she repeats it, "Make sure you hear all the sounds, because one of those words has an ending that is different."

Again, Ms. Hebert circulates among the children offering individual help as needed. If she had noticed that many children were making similar errors she would have stopped, regrouped, and retaught the targeted information. A few of the students make other mechanical errors, such as failing to capitalize the first letter or forgetting to end the sentence with a period. To address this, she gently prompts them to always check their work before sharing.

When asked about this instruction, she said, "Dictation is really about consolidating a whole constellation of skills, including phonics knowledge, word recognition, handwriting, and composition," She then added, "Daily dictation practice gives students the opportunity to bring lots of skills together." As shown in this lesson example, dictation was used to support guided practice of newly learned information. Ms. Hebert

had introduced her students to a new digraph. She was using dictation to initiate guided practice opportunities for the children to practice writing words containing digraphs. As they did so, she shared additional supports as needed.

Fisher, D., Frey, N., & Lapp, D. (2022). *Teaching reading: A playbook for developing skilled readers through word recognition and language comprehension: Grades PreK-6*. Corwin.