TAKING A LOOK AT DECODABLE TEXTS

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Texts that fit within a decodable label use words that are carefully controlled by the spelling patterns. These texts give learners multiple opportunities to apply their developing decoding skills in real texts.

The spelling patterns used follow a scope and sequence whereby early reading texts use words with a restricted word pattern along with a few high utility words (e.g., I, the, my) to make a sentence work. The texts use a limited number of letters in the first instance and only consonant-vowel-consonant words. As the sequence progresses more letters are introduced but the scope of c-v-c stays the same. Once c-v-c is mastered, the scope then advances to include consonant clusters and vowel teams.

The controlled nature of decodable texts means the texts can seem to have no meaning. In addition, they are often accused of being boring. Some critics believe that using decodable texts will put children off reading. It is true that the sentence cadence is less natural than speech due to restrictions involved in keeping to words of one syllable. The texts are not as rich as regular picturebooks or other reading series books that do not control for spelling patterns. But decodable texts can be a good story and are they are engaging texts for children learning to read for themselves.

The way a well-constructed decodable text engages children has similarities to the way a good picturebook works. A well-designed picturebook, one that is for reading aloud to children, allows the pictures to tell the story that cannot be told as effectively in the words (Nodelman, 1988). There is a magic in the space created by what the words can say and what the pictures can portray. The role of pictures is in creating layers of meaning, especially for meaning beyond a surface interpretation (Braid, 2008).

An example of how effectively the words and pictures work together in a picturebook is My cat Maisie by Pamela Allen. When a stray cat arrives at Andrew's house, Andrew is really pleased because he knows lots of marvellous games to play with a cat. The words clearly tell what Andrew says and does: Let's be helicopters and whizz round and round.

The words do not say how Andrew or the cat feel about the activities, but the pictures very clearly portray a happy Andrew and a rather unhappy cat. When reading this aloud to children (and adults), they laugh nervously as they fill in the gaps of what this activity means to a cat. Throughout the book, the words and the pictures work together to advance the story. The book is a powerful reading experience because carefully crafted words leave a space for the reader to fill in the gaps using the pictures to make a full story.

The picturebook technique is evident in well-made decodable texts where the books tell a story even with very limited text. Books from two different series, Sunshine decodables and Little Learners Love Literacy, are used to show how the elements of a picturebook are used to advance a good story within the limits of using words from a scope and sequence.

In the Sunshine Phonics series, the text in The big box tells the story of children making things from an empty cardboard box. One of the pages has Nat imagining that the box will be a hut. The words say The box will be a hut and leave the pictures to show what this will look like, painted pink and white with flowers.
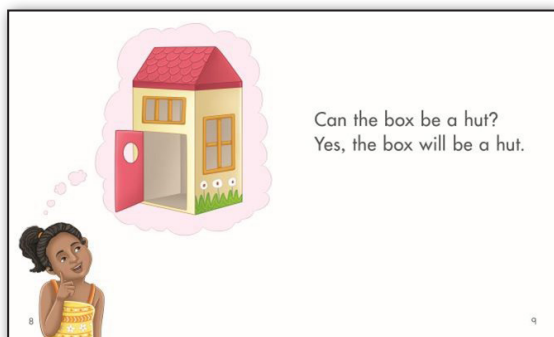

The picture of the finished hut shows it still looks like a cardboard box. When I pointed this out to one child who had read the book, she began a conversation about what would be needed for the box to be like it was in Nat's imagination. The picture provides at least half of the narrative, which is exactly what a well-constructed picturebook does.

In another story in the Sunshine Phonics series, The big bug, the text tells of an annoying bug in the house. The text on the final page reads 'The fan gets rid of the bug'. The picture shows Gus the cat cheekily turning on the fan to blow the bug out of the window. The pictures advance the story and add humour and there is much to discuss with the children when reading.

Children are observant and find these picture features intriguing and satisfying. When I remarked to a child who had read the book that it was a clever solution for the fan to get rid of the bug, he delighted in showing that it was actually Gus that was clever. It is particularly powerful for children when they have successfully read the words and then combine that sentence with their observations of the illustrations. It now feels like a story.[1]

A third example of the words and pictures working together from the Sunshine series is the book Tip it. In this book, Dan is at the tap filling a bucket with water. The words state: 'Dan is at the tap'. Mystery is set up. Page turn. 'Dan tips it.' The picture shows he tips water on his sister Nat. The children reading this text find this picture hilarious. But wait. Page turn. Now the text reads: 'Nat is at the tap.' Suspense. Prediction. Turn the page and the text says: 'Nat tips it.
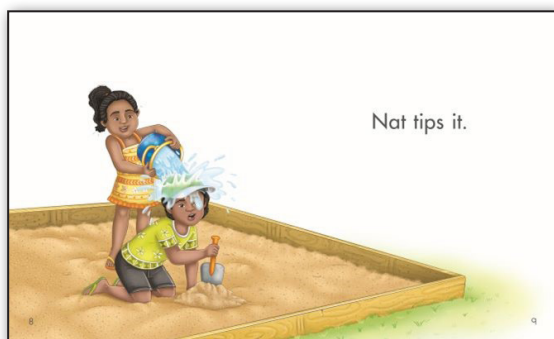

The text does not need to add the phrase 'tips the bucket of water over Dan'. It would be a lesser experience if it did. The picture shows Dan being surprised by a bucket of water over him. The children reading this text are most engaged with its simplicity and humour. They also feel pleased with themselves as readers because they are successfully reading the words.

In the Wiz kids' series (Little Learners Love Literacy), one of the levels includes five books with stories about Viv and her dog Bob. Over the five stories, the characters are introduced: Viv (the pictures show she is a scientist), Bob (Viv's dog), and Vog (an alien). Each short story builds from the one before.
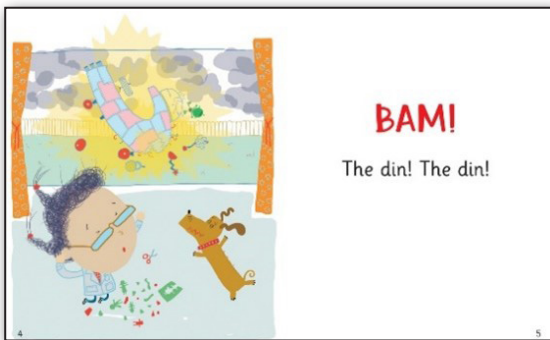
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[1] The explanation of how picturebooks work does not suggest the use of pictures to work out words when children are reading for themselves. The pictures are an important part of the narrative but not a useful cue for decoding a word.

In story one, Viv is in the lab and so is her dog Bob.
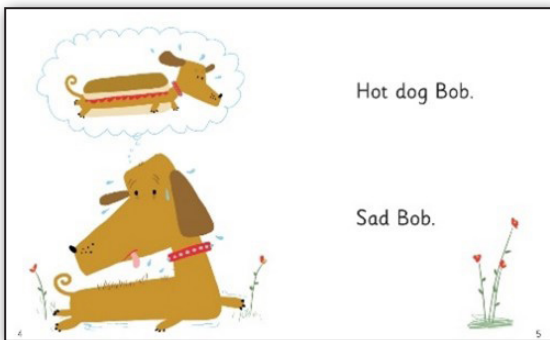
In story two, Bob the dog is hot and Viv has to get a fan so his not hot.

Vog the alien is introduced in story three and in story four Vog leaves his planet. In story five, Vog's space pod crashes on Viv and Bob's lawn, bringing the characters of this set together.

The pictures in these deceptively simple books bring humour and add to the narrative. There is development of character and the connections from one story to the next stimulate the wondering of what Viv and her dog Bob are going to get up to next.

Further connections between books occurs in the Little Learners Love Literacy series. For example, in the story The Shed Shop, Tim and Pip have the job of cleaning up a junk filled shed. In the process of the clean-up, they get money for a number of items. In the next book in that level, The Munch Bunch Fun Park, the story begins 'Pip and Tim had a lot of cash', which is a satisfying link for a reader as they recall the plot and characters of the previous book and enjoy the next instalment.

Connecting with characters and plot is vital for engagement with study and it is my experience that children do this with these cleverly constructed decodable texts, even with the restricted words. Many children identify with the characters and the plot as found in the Sunshine and Little Learners series. I hear teachers saying that the children can't wait to know what the characters will do next. One teacher told of a child who was impatiently waiting for the arrival of the next set of Sunshine books, so he could find out what Sam was going to do next. The anticipation and desire reminded me of children waiting for the next Harry Potter. There is no need to worry that children will not be making sense of the story. They do this and they connect with characters.

There are other reasons decodable texts are important.

1. The books allow learners to learn about print from small units to larger, from short vowel (c-v-c) to vowel teams (c-vv-c) to multisyllable.

2. The books are dependable for early readers. Teaching focuses on the word patterns and the skills needed to decode (and spell) these words. The books do not present children with challenge beyond what they have been taught/are learning.

3. The books give the learner multiple opportunities to secure the particular word pattern being taught. Children have the opportunity to overlearn one spelling pattern (e.g., c-v-c) and secure the necessary orthographic map.

4. The use of decodable texts allows teachers to teach in a way that does not rely on the pictures for successful decoding.

5. Meaning can be brought in after the decoding e.g., The van is in the bog (yes look it is in the muddy bog); Tim is sad (look at the picture and see he IS sad). Children can decode using the print, then check the picture. The picture gives confirmation of success in the process.

6. The texts are a surprising source of vocabulary development because it is unusual for children to hear words such as sob, suds, bog, dam, or dip. One teacher found that she needed to show the children what it means to 'dip in' the pool and she did this by using a teabag.

Decodable texts are not the only texts necessary for teaching reading. Children need a wide range of books read to them as well as access to texts that are less controlled as their skills increase. But decodable texts are a key resource in teaching beginning readers. Decodable texts will never be favourite read-alouds because the sentence structure is restricted. But being a delicious read-aloud or great literature is not the purpose of these texts. The main purpose is to be a text where code skills can be successfully applied. Creating a good decodable text means to know and keep to this purpose.

It is wrong to suggest that decodable texts are not engaging for children or that there is no meaning to the stories. There is power for the learner in being able to successfully read the words then use the illustrations to make connections between what the words say and what the pictures tell. Not only do the stories in decodable texts have meaning, but the books enable the children to BE successful readers. That is a powerful combination.

With thanks to Sunshine Books for permission to use images 1,2,3

With thanks to Little Learners Love Literacy for permission to use images 4,5,6

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