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# WAYS OF DEVELOPING ENGLISH WORD DECODING SKILLS AMONG PRIMARY SCHOOL PUPILS

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https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.23056062

**Abstract:** This article examines the development of English word decoding skills among primary school pupils and highlights the role of systematic phonics instruction in establishing the foundations of early English reading. Particular attention is given to the relationship between grapheme–phoneme correspondence, phonological awareness, phoneme segmentation, phoneme blending, and decoding accuracy and fluency. The article discusses the methodological challenges associated with learning to read English as a foreign language, particularly due to the complex and often inconsistent relationship between English spelling and pronunciation. It emphasizes that teaching pupils to recognize and memorize words as whole units alone may not sufficiently prepare them to decode unfamiliar words independently. Therefore, systematic instruction that enables learners to establish sound–letter correspondences, segment words into individual phonemes, blend sounds into complete words, and apply these skills in meaningful reading contexts is considered essential. Drawing on the approaches discussed by Koda (2007), Blachman (2007), Woore (2009), and Rognan et al. (2026), the article outlines a gradual sequence for developing decoding skills, beginning with sound–letter correspondence and progressing towards phoneme analysis, blending, accurate and fluent decoding, contextualized reading, and the integration of reading and writing. The article concludes that systematic phonics instruction may provide a valuable methodological foundation for strengthening primary school pupils' ability to decode unfamiliar English words and for supporting the subsequent development of reading fluency and written language skills.

**Keywords:** phonics, decoding, phonological awareness, phoneme blending, phoneme segmentation, grapheme–phoneme correspondence, English as a foreign language, primary education, reading fluency, early literacy.

## Introduction

One of the fundamental prerequisites for developing English reading skills at the primary education level is learners' ability to establish meaningful connections between written symbols and their corresponding sounds and subsequently combine those sounds to identify the pronunciation of a word. From this perspective, the development of English word decoding skills represents a significant foundation for the subsequent development of reading literacy among primary school pupils.

Decoding has long constituted an important area of research in first-language literacy development and reading instruction. Over the past two decades, however, increasing scholarly attention has also been directed towards decoding within the broader field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). In this context, Koda (2007) emphasizes the importance of the phonological and orthographic characteristics of a

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learner's first language in understanding reading processes in a second language. Nevertheless, the relationship between systematic phonics instruction and the development of decoding skills among Uzbek primary school pupils learning English as a foreign language remains insufficiently explored. Consequently, further investigation of the potential contribution of systematic phonics instruction to the development of English reading skills among Uzbek learners is particularly relevant.

In Uzbekistan, the demand for introducing English at an increasingly early age has also grown. In particular, systematic instruction in grapheme–phoneme correspondence at the primary education level may contribute to learners' ability to read unfamiliar words independently, pronounce them accurately, and subsequently develop their writing skills. Such an approach shifts the emphasis from simply memorizing individual words towards enabling learners to decode unfamiliar lexical items by converting written symbols into their corresponding sounds.

The Importance of Decoding in English. Learning to read in English can be comparatively challenging because the relationship between English orthography and pronunciation is not always consistent or transparent. The correspondence between written forms and spoken sounds may vary considerably across words. Consequently, teaching primary school learners of English as a foreign language to read and pronounce unfamiliar words independently presents a number of methodological challenges.

Within more traditional approaches to reading instruction, pupils may acquire certain words through whole-word memorization, commonly referred to as sight-word learning, or may rely on phonetic transcription to support pronunciation. Although such approaches can assist learners in recognizing particular lexical items, they may not always provide sufficient preparation for independently decoding unfamiliar words. In particular, when learners have not developed a clear understanding of the relationship between written and spoken forms of language, encountering new words can present considerable difficulties.

For this reason, teaching primary school pupils to decode unfamiliar words on the basis of systematic sound–letter relationships can be regarded as an important methodological direction. Once learners understand how speech sounds are represented through written symbols and acquire the ability to analyze and combine those sounds sequentially, they become better equipped to approach unfamiliar words independently rather than relying exclusively on memorization.

Rognan et al. (2026) identify phonics knowledge, particularly systematic grapheme–phoneme correspondences established during the early stages of schooling, as an important indicator associated with subsequent reading ability. Their analysis of different phonics programmes focuses on how phonics knowledge supports word decoding and highlights its relevance to the reading process.

The Relationship between Phonological Awareness and Decoding

Phonological awareness occupies a central position in the development of decoding skills. It refers to the ability to recognize and consciously manipulate the sound structure of spoken language, including larger units such as words and syllables and smaller units such as phonemes. The ability to distinguish individual sounds within a word, isolate them, and subsequently combine them into a coherent whole constitutes an important prerequisite for successful decoding.

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At the primary education level, some learners may experience difficulties in decoding because their ability to analyze spoken language in terms of individual sound units and to recognize relationships among those units has not yet been sufficiently developed. From this perspective, instructional activities focusing on phoneme segmentation and phoneme blending may serve as important means of strengthening decoding ability.

For instance, learners may first listen to a sequence of individual phonemes and gradually learn to blend these sounds together to produce a complete word. Conversely, when learners hear a complete word and identify the individual phonemes that constitute it, they develop segmentation skills. Accordingly, phonics instruction integrated with phonological-awareness activities, particularly blending and segmenting tasks, may facilitate the process through which learners convert written symbols into their corresponding sounds.

Snow et al. describe decoding as the process of determining the pronunciation of a word by drawing on knowledge of systematic relationships between letters and sounds. Woore (2009), similarly, defines phonological decoding as the process of converting written symbols or graphemes into the sounds they represent. Thus, the decoding process fundamentally depends on learners' knowledge of grapheme–phoneme correspondence, their ability to analyze phonemes, and their ability to blend them into recognizable words.

Practical Ways of Developing Decoding Skills. The development of decoding skills among primary school pupils requires phonics instruction to be organized systematically and progressively. The approach discussed by Blachman (2007) emphasizes the importance of initially establishing connections between sounds and written symbols, followed by phoneme analysis and blending, the development of reading fluency, and the gradual integration of reading and writing activities.

When this approach is adapted to English language instruction at the primary level, the following sequence may be implemented.

1. Establishing Sound–Letter Correspondence. At the initial stage, learners are explicitly introduced to the relationship between individual letters or letter combinations and their corresponding sounds. These associations are then reinforced through systematic repetition and controlled practice.

2. Analysing and Blending Phonemes. At the second stage, learners identify and isolate individual sounds within words and subsequently combine them to construct complete words. Phoneme blending and phoneme segmentation occupy a central position at this stage because they help learners establish a direct connection between the sound structure of words and their written representation.

3. Developing Accurate and Fluent Decoding. Once learners have acquired basic grapheme–phoneme correspondences, they begin to apply this knowledge to reading simple words and gradually progress towards more complex lexical forms. Regular and structured practice can contribute to increasing both decoding accuracy and reading speed.

4. Applying Decoded Words in Meaningful Texts. Decoding instruction should not remain restricted to isolated words. Learners should also be provided with opportunities to encounter decoded words in short, age-appropriate texts. This helps connect the development of decoding skills with authentic reading activity and provides learners with opportunities to apply their knowledge in context.

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5. Integrating Reading and Writing. Reading and writing activities can be integrated into phonics instruction through tasks such as writing words from dictation, constructing words from individual letters, rearranging letters to form words, and representing heard words in written form. Such activities reinforce the interconnectedness of phonemes, graphemes, reading, and writing.

Blachman (2007) also highlights the potential value of practical activities that actively involve learners in the decoding process. These may include letter cards, movable letters for word construction, activities requiring learners to arrange sounds sequentially, short timed exercises, and written tasks. Through such activities, learners move beyond simply recognizing a visual symbol: they establish a sound association, analyze individual phonemes, and combine them to construct meaningful words.

Conclusion

The analysis presented above indicates that the development of English word decoding skills among primary school pupils should extend beyond the memorization of isolated words. Rather, decoding instruction should be systematically structured around the acquisition of sound–letter relationships, the development of phonological awareness, phoneme segmentation and blending, the development of decoding accuracy and fluency, and the systematic integration of reading and writing activities.

Moreover, teachers do not necessarily need to develop phonics instruction independently for each instructional context. Instead, they may draw upon scientifically grounded and practically established systematic approaches and adapt them to the specific needs of primary school learners. Such an approach may expand pupils' capacity to read unfamiliar English words independently while simultaneously establishing a foundation for the subsequent development of reading fluency and written language skills.

Within the context of early English language education in Uzbekistan, this direction may provide a valuable scientific and methodological basis for developing effective forms of phonics instruction, adapting them to the content and requirements of primary education, and improving methodological approaches to the development of English word decoding skills.

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