A DECODING PROGRAM FOR POOR READERS—AND THE REST OF THE CLASS, TOO!
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Analogy holds the key in this program designed to help poor readers learn how to decode unknown words as they read text.

What do you do to help poor readers break the code when, by the time they walk through your door, they have been exposed to bits and pieces of numerous approaches to decoding—and failed in all of them? That was the problem that set us looking for an uncomplicated, natural approach to decoding. At Benchmark School, a school for poor readers, we settled on an approach in which students use words they know to figure out what they don’t know—an analogy approach. When the students did not know any words, we taught them a few “key words” to get them started. The analogy approach is an approach that our students think makes sense. Now they get excited when they see an unknown word—they view it as an opportunity to show off their new strategy. As Joey recently told his teacher, “You know, this stuff really works. You ought to tell other teachers about it.”

In this article we discuss the analogy program as applied for two years in a resource room in a public elementary school. We begin with a review of the literature and rationale for teaching poor readers to decode by analogy. Then we describe the Benchmark word identification research and development project and the resulting compare/contrast approach to decoding. These descriptions are followed by a discussion of how the program was introduced into the resource room, how the students responded to the program, and how the program affected the students’ decoding and reading progress in general. We conclude with our adaptation of the compare/contrast approach for teaching decoding to other children who do not exhibit reading problems.
The Need to Teach Decoding

The goal of our program is to provide instruction that facilitates independence in the construction of meaning. One foundation element in reaching this goal is automaticity in decoding words. We believe decoding automaticity is attainable for all children through a program that revolves around authentic reading and language experiences. We especially want to believe this because phonics programs that purport to lead to automaticity have not achieved that outcome with our students.

Upon entry to Benchmark, most of our students have already failed in one or more decoding programs and seem to have little expectation that what they read will make sense. They often can repeat accurately phonetic generalizations but rarely know how to apply them. Even when supplied with the individual sounds that make up a word, students new to our school usually cannot combine these sounds into a recognizable word.

Our antidote for these maladies is to immerse the students in a rich language environment where teachers and parents read literature to children, invite them to talk or write about the meanings a piece may have, and encourage them to practice reading some of these same books to others. It is an environment where children not only publish books but also check out and read books from the school library, books written by student authors as well as by adult authors. Also, small groups of children read books in common and talk about the nuances in words, sentences, and paragraphs. This antidote has proved highly effective: Throughout our 20-year history, the number of words our students read is the one factor that consistently correlates with the progress they make in reading. Thus, we are convinced that the way to create readers is to allow children to read.

However, as the school entered its second decade we became increasingly aware that, despite immersing our students in rich reading, writing, and other language experiences, all of our students did not become readers. Some stagnated between third and fourth reader levels, unable to decode the words that were neither in their background of experience nor part of their sight vocabulary. These students seemed to depend almost

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totally on the context of what they read to supply clues for figuring out unknown words. When the context was unfamiliar, their only strategies for coping with an unknown word were to skip it or ask someone. They exhibited little evidence of having discovered the patterns in our language. This finding suggested a need for reading and writing experiences that would make explicit the principles and patterns so crucial for automatic decoding. Nevertheless, we were extremely reluctant to teach the kind of phonics available in the schools that referred poor readers to our classrooms. Our students associated failure with those programs. The decoding program we presented would have to look and feel different. We decided to examine what the research had to say about how children learn to decode unknown words.

We learned, as we had suspected, that automaticity in decoding words independent of context is characteristic of good readers, though not of poor readers (Stanovich, 1984). In fact, poor readers frequently enter the intermediate grades with a basic sight vocabulary, yet without having developed concomitant sound-symbol knowledge (Zivian & Samuels, 1986). Apparently, poor readers do not discover clues about these orthographic relationships as good readers do; rather, poor readers depend on explicit instruction to learn how written English works (Barr & Dreeban, 1983; Calfee & Drum, 1986; Johnson & Baumann, 1984).

For poor readers, breakdowns in the meaning-making process often occur either at the level of awareness of basic sound units (e.g., supplying rhyming words or matching auditorily words that begin with the same sound) or at the level of associating a symbol or visual pattern with a sound or sound unit and blending these parts to decode words (Bradley & Bryant, 1983; Perfetti, 1985; Stanovich, 1986). It appeared that to construct meaning from text our students needed not only a sight vocabulary but also the phonological awareness and related sound-symbol association skills involved in the development of automatic decoding ability.

In searching for guidelines to help our students become automatic decoders, we discovered that in recent years there has been increased interest in decoding by analogy.
(Cunningham, Moore, Cunningham, & Moore, 1983; Mason & Au, 1986). This interest has been spurred by studies that have shown that when good readers come on unfamiliar words, they use analogous known words to decode the unknown words (Cunningham, 1975–76; Glushko, 1979; Perfetti, 1985; Stanovich, 1984). For example, one might use smile to figure out the word vile or the words in, on, this, and went to decode inconsistent.

In a recent comprehensive review of the research related to learning to read, Adams (1990a, 1990b) concluded that an analogy approach is not only a strategy used by skilled readers but also an effective method for teaching students to decode.

Our review of the research led to additional concepts that seemed important to share with our students. For example, we learned that skilled readers segment words into useful chunks such as roots, affixes, syllables, and phonograms (Fowler, Napps, & Feldman, 1985; McClelland & Johnston, 1977; Torgesen, 1985; Vellutino & Scanlon, 1984) and that they are flexible in their approach to pronouncing words (Gibson & Levin, 1975; Gleitman, 1985). These concepts, along with using known words to decode unknown words and becoming automatic in the recognition of words, undergird the approach we use to help students decode unknown words.

**Development of a Decoding Program**

In the mid-1980s Benchmark School initiated the development of a systematic decoding program based on an analogy approach. The development and field testing of the program took place over four years and was accomplished in collaboration with the Center for the Study of Reading. Data were collected and analyzed each year. Based on this analysis, recommendations were shared with the staff for the further development of the program.

Though preliminary results indicated that students who were instructed using the Word Identification Program improved in decoding at the school where it was developed (Gaskins, Downer, Anderson, Cunningham, Gaskins, Schommer, & the Teachers of Benchmark School, 1988), we felt that it was important to investigate the feasibility and effectiveness of the program in different educational settings. Therefore, the first two...
authors implemented the program in a university reading clinic, and the second author used it in a public school resource room. In addition, we have each shared our ideas and materials with public and private school teachers in our own communities, as well as beyond, and have anecdotal reports that others, too, are excited about the eagerness with which their students now attack unknown words.

**An Analogy Approach to Word Identification: The Program**

We call the analogy approach to decoding compare/contrast and divide instruction into Beginning and Intermediate levels. The program is designed for students in grades 1–8 who have not developed automaticity in decoding. The Beginning Program is for students who are nonreaders to those reading at a beginning second-grade level, while the Intermediate Program is for poor decoders who read at a mid-second-grade to sixth-grade level. Students in both the Beginning and Intermediate Programs are taught to decode words by comparing an unknown word to known “key words.”

These “key words” are words that represent the common phonograms (spelling patterns) in the English language (Fry, Fountoukidis, & Polk, 1985; Sakiey & Fry, 1984). During the development of the program, teacher feedback about the utility of these key phonograms guided the selection of the 120 phonograms for the Beginning Program. Most of the remaining 94 major and minor phonograms listed by Fry et al. (1985) are introduced in the Intermediate Program. Student awareness of these phonograms is developed by their learning interesting, one-syllable “key words” that represent each phonogram.

The program is teacher-directed and grounded in an explicit-instruction model. Each day teachers clearly tell students what they are going to teach, why it is important, when it can be used, and how to use it. The teachers then model the process. After that there is group and individual guided practice with teacher feedback. The program keeps both the teacher and students involved for every minute of the 20-minute lesson. All activities are designed for every-pupil response and teacher feedback to students. The program emphasizes the importance of gradually releasing responsibility from teacher to students.

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and having the students meet with a high level of success through learning from teacher feedback about their errors in decoding.

*The Beginning Program*

The Beginning Program introduces students to the key words by using a structured language-experience approach reinforced with phonemic awareness and every-pupil-response activities. Each week 5 new words are introduced and reinforced through various activities. Most of the new words are key words; a few are high-frequency, irregular words. Also, previously introduced words and sounds of initial consonant letters and consonant clusters as they occur in whole words are part of a daily review using activities. The activities require students to apply what they have learned to the decoding of unknown words both in isolation and in context. The goal is automaticity of application so that students can be free to concentrate on meaning.

To illustrate the Beginning Program, we briefly summarize a typical week’s lessons and the introduction of 5 new words. This particular week, the key words are *day, flew, flag,* and *red.* *Have,* an irregular word, is also introduced. These words are written on pieces of colored construction paper and displayed on the chalkboard using magnets. At week’s end, the 5 words are displayed with the other words that have been introduced to that point in the year. The words are arranged in alphabetical order and located on the “word wall” above the chalkboard in the front of the classroom. Also displayed on the chalkboard is a sentence strip reading, “The senator was an incumbent and so won the election easily.”

The Monday lesson begins with the teacher asking the students *why* they have daily decoding lessons. One student says that the lessons give her a way to figure out unknown words when she is reading. The teacher then *models* his own thinking, using the compare/contrast approach to decode the word *incumbent* in the sentence on the chalkboard:
The senator was an incumbent and so won the election easily. I can’t think of a word that would make sense in this sentence, so I think I’ll try the compare/contrast strategy. I need to look for spelling patterns. I know a spelling pattern is the vowel and what comes after it. So, the first spelling pattern in this word is i-n. I-n is a word I already know, in, so I’ll move to the next spelling pattern. In this case, that will be u-m. We have talked about the key word drum, so I will use that to help me with the second chunk. The third spelling pattern is e-n-t. I know the word tent. I already know the first chunk is in. And, if I know d-r-u-m is drum, then c-u-m is cum. And, if I know t-e-n-t is tent, then b-e-n-t is bent. The word is incumbent. Let’s see if that makes sense in the sentence. The senator was an incumbent and so won the election easily. Yes, that makes sense. I have heard that word on the news. I’m not exactly sure what it means though. I’ll look it up. It says that an incumbent is a person who holds an elective office or position.

Next, the 5 new words are introduced. Students volunteer to pronounce each word, use it in a sentence to demonstrate an understanding of its meaning, and identify the spelling pattern in each word. During this discussion the teacher asks why the word have is on black and white paper. A student responds that this is a signal that have is an irregular word, and although it will not be useful in decoding other words, it is a word that will occur frequently in the English language and is thus important to know.

Then as a group the students write a structured language-experience story that incorporates the 5 new words. When completed, the story is displayed in the room to be read and reread throughout the week. Often, the teacher also makes copies of the story to be sent home and read there as well. There are a number of reasons for having the class develop a story using the 5 new words. The first is that students view words as parts of meaningful text and expect words to be combined in a way that makes sense. We want our students to realize that the purpose of decoding words is to construct meaning. Another purpose of writing the language-experience story is to guide students to see the relationship between sounds and letters, to discover that white space between a group of letters is a clue that one word has ended and another begun, to notice the difference.
between the way words look and sound when one word is composed of more letters than
another, and to gain practice reading the key words by reading the stories the group has
composed.

The next Monday activity is Chant and Check Spelling, a writing activity to reinforce
awareness of spelling patterns. In this activity the teacher dictates the new words (and on
other days any words previously discussed) and uses each in a sentence. Students write
the words, either from memory (if they can) or by copying them from the board. When
all of the new words have been presented by the teacher, the students chant and check
their spelling while pointing to each letter as the group chants it.

The final activity on Monday is a game called What’s In My Head, another writing
activity to reinforce awareness of spelling patterns. In this game students are given five
clues to figure out the word in the teacher’s head. After each clue is given, students write
down their guesses as to the word’s identity. The first few clues are general ones, but
they become progressively more specific. For example, (1) My word is on the
chalkboard, (2) My word is a one-beat word, (3) My word rhymes with something that a
kitten does (mew), (4) My word begins with the same blend as in the word float, (5) The
birds blank south for the winter (flew).

The objective of the Tuesday lesson is to increase students’ phonemic awareness by
introducing a new consonant blend (in this particular lesson /fl/) and reviewing a
consonant blend (/fr/) and/or an initial consonant (/f/). The lesson begins with a review
of a previously discussed key concept in the compare/contrast strategy—in this particular
lesson, the importance of blends. The teacher then models the use of the
compare/contrast strategy to figure out a word in a sentence displayed on the chalkboard.
The teacher uses clock and let to decode rocket in the sentence. “The rocket went swiftly
into the air.” Then, the meaning of the word rocket is discussed.

Next, students receive every-pupil-response forms. For this activity they use a word bank
consisting of the 5 words introduced on Monday to fill in the blanks in 5 sentences. This
activity begins with the teacher reviewing the pronunciation of the new words. Then, the teacher reads the sentences aloud, and the students write their responses in each blank.

Tongue twisters are next. Written on a sentence strip displayed on the chalkboard is the sentence: “Fluffy Flamingo’s flea fluttered, flashing flawlessly.” The teacher reads this sentence aloud, then the class reads it together, and finally, each student has an opportunity to read it individually. This is followed by an every-pupil-response activity in which each student receives an index card on which he or she writes the word flag. The students are also asked to take from their file boxes two word cards from previous lessons (frog and fun). The teacher then reads a list of words that begin with either /fl/, /fr/, or /f/. After saying each word, the teacher says, “Ready, set, show”; with that, students hold up the index card that has written on it a word with the same beginning sound as the word just read. Tuesday’s lesson concludes with Chant and Check Spelling and What’s In My Head.

The objective of Wednesday’s lesson is to reinforce spelling patterns and use known words to decode unknown words. The lesson opens with a review. The teacher says, “There are two strategies that we are working on in word identification. Who can tell the class what they are?” A student responds that he has learned compare/contrast and context strategies. The teacher then models how to use the key words am and black to decode jampacked in the sentence “The stadium was jampacked.” The meaning of the sentence is then discussed.

Next, each student receives a spelling pattern every-pupil-response form. At the top of each sheet are three columns, each headed by a key word (look, pig, and hen). Underneath these columns is a word bank consisting of 12 words that share the same spelling patterns as the words listed above (e.g., shook, twig, and den). The students are instructed to place words with the same spelling pattern in the same column. After completing this word sort, students read the words aloud.
At the bottom of the page is text containing underlined words with the same spelling patterns as the key words featured at the top of the page. Students are instructed to write beneath each underlined word the key word that would be useful in decoding that word. The teacher then circulates and reads the text to the students, saying *blank* for the underlined words. For example, she reads to a student, “On a warship a jail is called a blank.” The student then says, “If this is *pig*, then this is *brig*.” Once again, the lesson closes with Chant and Check Spelling and What’s In My Head.

The Thursday and Friday lessons contain many of the activities found in the lessons on Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday. In addition, the objectives of the lessons are much the same. Throughout the week the teacher encourages application of the compare/contrast strategy in a variety of situations, emphasizing *why* the lessons are being taught, as well as *when* and *how* to use the compare/contrast strategy.

Both the Beginning and Intermediate Programs are taught as adjuncts to a regular reading program that features reading lots of trade books, student-authored stories, and basal readers. Our materials consist of whatever we can put in the hands of students that provides practice reading easy material and contributes to their viewing themselves as readers and viewing reading as a successful and enjoyable experience.

*The Intermediate Program*

In the Intermediate level of the program, the emphasis is on developing automaticity and flexibility in the application of the analogy approach. The first phase of the Intermediate Program is a review phase. Students review the 120 key words and apply them to phonetically regular and irregular polysyllabic words. The lessons in the review phase follow a 2-day cycle during which 3 key words are reviewed and applied to the decoding of polysyllabic words in meaningful contexts. In the second phase of the Intermediate Program, the moving-on phase, the lessons follow a 10-day cycle in which additional key words are introduced, generalizations about chunking (breaking words into spelling
patterns) are reviewed or introduced, word meanings are explored, and the morphological and lexical natures of our language are examined.

The following brief description of some of the activities and concepts introduced in one particular 10-day cycle in the moving-on phase gives a sense of what happens in the Intermediate Program. Students are introduced to 3 new key words, pal, gel, and rev, and are shown that they need to be flexible when they see the spelling patterns -al and -el because these spelling patterns may call for an “ul” sound (e.g., medal and jewel), as well as the sounds indicated by the key words for these spelling patterns. Students read text with polysyllabic words containing these patterns (e.g., celebrate and alcazar), as well as words with the unstressed vowel sound. Decoding the latter words leads to increased awareness of the need for flexibility in applying the key words and the usefulness of approximate pronunciations in triggering recognition of a word. Students also encounter orchestral, which is a springboard for the discussion of ch as in choir, chorus, and ache. Students learn that the morphogram val means worth, or to be strong or well, and are exposed to numerous examples of words with this morphogram (e.g., equivalent, valedictorian, evaluate, invalid, valor). Students analyze words with vowel-consonant-vowel patterns and recognize the need to be flexible in chunking these words (e.g., punish, rotate, second, meter). Each day the students also participate in the 2-Minute Check, an activity to develop automaticity in which they access key words as quickly as possible to decode words in meaningful contexts.

The Resource Room Setting

For the past two years the second author was the teacher in a resource room. The handicapping label for most of the first- through sixth-grade students who attended this resource room was “learning disabled.” The purpose of the resource room was to provide supplemental instruction in the areas of reading and math, as well as academic support in any content area where it was needed. During the two years the Word Identification Program was taught, 17 and 13 students respectively, attended the resource room,
spending from 30 minutes to one and one-half hours a day there. At any given time, there were between 1 and 5 students in the room.

**Putting the Program in Place**

The first step in setting up the Word Identification Program in the resource room at the beginning of each year was to arrange as many times a week as possible when groups of students with similar decoding needs could meet. This was not an easy task. Each child had to be scheduled in such a way that he/she did not miss classroom lessons in reading, math, and special subjects, lunch, or other special times.

During the first year the program was used with two groups of 5 students each. The groups received word identification instruction 3 times a week for 20–30 minutes per session. One group received instruction in the Intermediate lessons, and the other was placed in the Beginning lessons. During the second year 3 groups of students were scheduled for the same amount of time and number of sessions as the first year. Two of the groups were Intermediate groups. One consisted of 3 students; the other, 5. The third group was a Beginning group of 3 students.

Teaching the Beginning Program to one groups of students and the Intermediate Program to another—sometimes on the same day—presented the resource room teacher with a situation not experienced by teachers who developed the program. At Benchmark School where the program was first implemented, classes were arranged by reading ability. Thus, there needed to be only one level of the program taught in any one class.

Preparing both Beginning and Intermediate lessons did require more time than preparing one lesson, but such preparation was not unmanageable. Because the teacher’s manuals contained detailed instructions and prototypes of all the materials for the year, each lesson required about 10 minutes of preparation during the first year. This was reduced slightly during the second year, owing to familiarity with the program and the availability of some materials from the previous year. Preparation for each lesson entailed
thoroughly familiarizing oneself with the lesson, photocopying every-pupil-response sheets for the students, writing sentence strips, and, on some days, printing the key words on colored construction paper.

Despite the fact that the lessons were well-scripted by the authors, it was imperative to read thoroughly and understand the content and objectives of each lesson prior to attempting to teach it. Knowing the content of the lesson and understanding the rationale released the teacher from the script and allowed her to own the lesson and put it across more convincingly. Two of the by-products of preparation were that the lesson proceeded at a brisk pace (thus enabling more to be accomplished) and that the teacher was able to teach with confidence and enthusiasm.

**Modifications to the Program for Use in the Resource Room**

Despite the many differences between the resource room and the original setting for which the program was developed, there were virtually no changes that had to be made in the Beginning or Intermediate Program to meet the needs of the students in the resource room. The lessons proved to be as appropriate for the resource room as they had been for the students for whom the lessons were originally written. Regular classroom teachers who teach 20 to 25 students and use the program have told us the same thing. The lessons are well-suited for their population, too.

The authors of the Word Identification Program have emphasized that the analysis of their data at Benchmark suggested that in classrooms where there was the greatest fidelity to the program as designed, students made the greatest gains in decoding ability (Gaskins, Downer, Anderson, Cunningham, Gaskins, and Schommer, 1988). Thus, fidelity to the program as written appears to be a reasonable expectation both in the resource room and in the regular classroom. One disappointment was that, owing to scheduling difficulties, the students in the resource room were taught only about 50% to 60% of the lessons that were part of the year-long program at Benchmark School. We feel that, if the resource
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room students could have been scheduled for daily lessons, progress would very likely have been even more dramatic than it was.

Receptiveness of Students to the Program and Lessons Learned

During both years that the program was used, it was well received by the students in the Beginning level groups. From the outset these students not only enjoyed but also looked forward to learning how to decode. They liked the game-like quality of the lessons and the fact that they were receiving something new and different from their peers in the regular classroom.

This enthusiastic reception of Beginning Program was not mirrored in the students in the Intermediate Program. During the first year that the program was used, the Intermediate group initially resisted it. This group was composed of 5 fifth- and sixth-grade boys who were all older than most students at their grade placement. In addition, all were two or more years behind grade placement in reading. They had met with a great deal of failure and were not particularly open to anything related to reading. Thus, the program was introduced to a less-than-receptive audience.

To complicate matters further, the acknowledged student leader declared the program “babyish.” Given the other students’ low self-esteem and their desire to appear “cool,” they rejected the program, too. This rejection manifested itself in students’ calling out, working ahead of the teacher, and generally misbehaving. Based on subsequent experiences with the program, we realized that this rejection might have been avoided by giving the boys a preview of the “college” words they would be decoding in only a matter of weeks and more adequately explaining the value of learning the “babyish” key words.

In later introductions of the Intermediate Program we were able to share other students’ successes and illustrate presentations with examples of words students were able to pronounce before and after the program. Such introductions have tended to set the tone for positive student involvement.

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For three weeks the Intermediate-level students in the resource room continued their rejection of the program. The resource room teacher became very discouraged and nearly gave up. After all, had not the authors of the program made the point that this program, like any program, would not be appropriate for all students? But something happened that signaled a change in the students’ attitudes. During the latter part of the third week the students made it through an entire lesson without calling out, going ahead of the teacher, or acting out and, in the process, had done a nice job with the activities in the lesson. The teacher’s genuine enthusiasm and pride in the group’s success seemed to be transferred to the students. For the first time they seemed to believe that they could succeed using this program. The resource room teacher has since wondered if her anxiety about whether or not the program would work with these older, discouraged students may have contributed to the shaky beginning.

Immediately following the successful lesson, the teacher began to encourage the students to apply the compare/contrast strategy in their independent reading. Again the students met with success, and their attitudes toward the program became more positive. In addition, it was about this time that the lessons began to become decidedly more challenging. The students enjoyed what they perceived as the increased difficulty of the lessons, and this clearly contributed to their change in attitude toward the program.

During the second year of implementation only 4 students from the previous year took part in the program. The Intermediate group reacted positively to the program from the outset. This seemed to have resulted from the returning students’ positive attitudes toward the program and the new students’ enthusiasm and curiosity about the program they had heard about from the other students.

**The Effect of the Program on Students’ Reading**

During the two years it was implemented in the resource room, the compare/contrast Word Identification Program appeared to play an important role in a number of exciting
changes in students’ reading behaviors. These changes can be most clearly demonstrated through brief sketches of several of the students.

*Tom: The Product of Strategies Plus Lots of Reading*

Tom was a second grader who came to the resource room as a nonreader. He had very poor receptive and expressive language skills, virtually no sight vocabulary, and limited background knowledge. To him, reading was saying a word for each group of symbols on the page. Which word was associated with which group of symbols seemed of less importance. Consequently, many of his substitutions were not meaningful. He put in seemingly random words that he knew, some even being nonsense words. He did not deliberate over words at all but simply rattled off a string of words until he considered the text completed.

After a few months in the Word Identification Program, an event occurred that proved to be the turning point in Tom’s reading. While reading the predictable book *Night-time* by Joy Cowley (1988) with the resource room teacher, Tom came upon *stable*, a word he did not know how to pronounce. To the resource room teacher’s amazement, Tom declared, “I know the ’pair’/’trast strategy. I know *table*; this is *stable!*” This was the first time that Tom had used the compare/contrast strategy independently, and it was truly a breakthrough for him as a reader. He now had a way to decode unknown words. Tom himself seemed to realize the value of the strategy, for he promptly used it again in the second sentence to figure out *sty*. He said, “I know *cry*, so this is *sty*.”

In another predictable book by Joy Cowley, *The Tree-house* (1988), Tom again demonstrated how the compare/contrast strategy had helped him decode unknown words. The book read:


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Picture clues clearly assisted his decoding of the animal names, but picture clues were of little help in decoding *bim-bam-bumpy*. When Tom came to the final sentence, he paused and said, “I know *him* so this (pointed to *bim*) is *bim*. I know *am*, so this is *bam*. And, I know *jump*, so this is *bumpy*. Bim-bam-bumpy!”

It was about this same time that Tom realized that reading had to make sense. He began to use context clues in conjunction with the compare/contrast strategy and, as a result, began to meet with even greater success as a reader. For the first time he viewed himself as a reader. The floodgates opened. He wanted to share his reading with anyone who would listen. Rhyming poems were among his favorite reading materials. He read them to his class and to the principal. In fact, by the end of the year, Tom had read 100 books as part of his regular classroom’s reading incentive program. Clearly, the Word Identification Program had played an important role in his development as a reader, and lots of easy reading had given him the opportunity to apply what he was learning.

**Jill: The Product of Patience and Modeling**

Jill was one of only three students who received the program for two full years. She was also in the resource room the year before the program was introduced. Jill entered the resource room as a second grader. Her reading at that time was characterized by substitutions based on the initial consonants of the intended words and a total lack of self-correction, even when her substitutions did not make sense in the sentence. During the year prior to instruction in the Word Identification Program, Jill was taught to use context and a bevy of standard phonics concepts to decode unknown words (e.g., when a word or syllable ends with a vowel, the vowel is usually long unless it is final *E*; when there are two vowels together, the first one usually says its name). But these phonics principles proved too abstract for Jill. In addition, she was unable to hold in mind the isolated sounds of long and short vowels. Jill made little progress in reading during her first year in the resource room.
During her second year she was instructed in the compare/contrast method, but her gains that year also were disappointingly modest. She needed a great deal of teacher guidance in order to apply the compare/contrast strategy effectively.

During her third year (her second year in the program), however, something clicked. That year Jill was instructed in the Intermediate Program, and she quickly became the star of the group. She was an active participant in the lessons and always anxious to share examples of when she had used the compare/contrast strategy to decode words outside the resource room.

We pondered why it took so long for Jill to respond to the program and were reminded of the students at Benchmark School who had responded similarly. The program was designed for just that to happen—each child can take from the program what he/she is ready to learn, yet can still feel successful. It is the teacher who grows impatient. Another factor supporting Jill’s success the second year in the program, in addition to increased phonemic readiness, was Jill’s responsiveness to mental modeling.

Mental modeling by the teacher of how to use the compare/contrast approach to decoding was a daily part of the Intermediate Program, and Jill seemed to profit from those explicit examples. She seemed to need to know exactly what to say to herself when she did not know a word. The repeated exposures to the teacher’s mental modeling with comments such as “Context didn’t help with this word, so let’s be flexible and try the compare/contrast strategy” really left their mark on Jill. This was most noticeable when Jill read aloud with Tom in the resource room. During this time Jill mimicked the resource room teacher’s modeling and encouraged Tom to use the compare/contrast strategy and to “be flexible.”

Jill also provided an example that validated the statement by Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, and Wilkinson (1985) that the importance of decoding strategies is to allow the decoder to arrive at an “approximate” pronunciation that triggers the recognition of the word. In reading the book, Happy Birthday, Little Witch (Hautzig, 1985), Jill used the
compare/contrast strategy to figure out the word *captain*. When she came to *captain*, she said, “I know the word *cap*, and I know the word *rain,…cap*, tane. Oh, I know, captain!” (correct pronunciation). Clearly, even though the compare/contrast strategy did not provide her with the exact pronunciation of the second chunk of the word, it got her close enough so that she could figure it out.

One of the most noticeable changes in Jill’s reading during her third year in the resource room was the dramatic increase in the number of times she self-corrected. Jill now fully realized that reading had to make sense. She was not only more aware of her mistakes, but she also knew how to correct them. Best of all, her regular classroom teacher commented that Jill was using the compare/contrast strategy effectively in her classroom reading group.

Though Jill did not appear to respond immediately to instruction in the Word Identification Program, it was apparent that during her second year the compare/contrast strategy was becoming an integral part of her arsenal of strategies. The internalization of the teacher’s mental modeling seemed to be the key ingredient in finally launching Jill as an independent decoder.

*Jimmy: The Product of Resource Room/Classroom Congruence*

Jimmy entered the resource room as a second grader reading preprimer materials. Characteristically, when Jimmy came to an unknown word, he would say “blank” for the word, go on reading, and never return to decode it. On those few occasions when he did attempt decoding, he would usually substitute a word based on the initial consonant of the unknown word. But Jimmy’s most typical strategy for handling an unknown word was to pause and wait for the teacher to supply it.

Given this array of strategies, the resource room teacher was surprised and delighted to have Jimmy’s classroom teacher tell her that when Jimmy came to the word *tell* in his basal reader, she heard him say under his breath, “I know *bell……tell*.” This occurred
after about a month in the Word Identification Program. Because Jimmy’s teacher wanted to encourage his continued use of this strategy, she asked the resource room teacher for information about the program and for copies of the word list and other visual aids used.

Jimmy continued to show steady improvement in his decoding throughout the year. In fact he used the compare/contrast strategy during his end-of-year testing on the reading subtest of the *Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-educational Battery* (Woodcock & Johnson, 1977). When Jimmy was faced with the task of decoding nonsense words, he figured out *hap* by using *nap*, *nan* by using *can*, and *jox* by using *box*. Clearly, he had been able to apply successfully what he had learned.

**Rick: The Product of Realizing Benefits**

Rick was a sixth grader who was new to the school and to the resource room. He exhibited little difficulty decoding one-syllable words but more often than not was unable to decode multisyllabic words. Rick’s approach to multisyllabic words was either to guess, based on the initial consonant, or mumble through the word. In neither case did he attempt to self-correct. These dysfunctional decoding strategies seemed at the heart of his difficulties in a number of subjects, particularly social studies and science, where multisyllabic words were prevalent.

Rick was exciting to teach. From the day of his first word identification lesson, he seemed to sense that these lessons held the key to his success. When he finished an activity, he would make up more examples of his own to practice the concept being learned. When he had extra time, he enjoyed going through sentence strips from other lessons to practice using the compare/contrast strategy. He also enjoyed receiving cartoons from the resource room teacher that contained multisyllabic words for him to decode.
One day his teacher gave him a copy of a Ziggy cartoon with the word *impeachment* underlined. Rick came to the word and said, “Well, I know *him*, so this is *im*. I know *teach*, so this is *peach*. And, I know *tent*, so this is *ment*. So, the word’s *impeachment*.”

At the same time that Rick was diligently practicing his decoding skills, he was also beginning to apply them to his social studies and science textbooks. While working with the resource room teacher on a social studies lesson about Greece, Rick came to the word *Parthenon*. He proceeded to not only call to mind analogous words to use to decode the first and last spelling patterns of the word, but he also told the teacher that the vowel in the chunk in the middle probably would have an “uh” sound, “because, when you put long words together, you kind of slur over the vowel sounds in every other chunk. Compare/contrast is just supposed to get you close enough so you recognize the word.”

Given his work habits, it was not surprising that Rick made extraordinary gains in both his decoding and reading during that year. In fact, Rick’s grade equivalency score at the end of the year on the reading subtest of the *Woodcock-Johnson Psycho-education Battery* (Woodcock & Johnson, 1977) indicated that he made over three years’ progress since he had been tested the previous spring. Rick’s handicapping classification was removed at the end of the year.

**Ancillary Benefits**

*Confidence and Attitudes*

Though the most obvious place to look for positive effects of the Word Identification Program is the students’ decoding abilities, there also is evidence that the program played an important role in students’ increased confidence and improved attitudes toward reading. Students felt confident that by using a combination of compare/contrast and context clues, they independently could decode most words they encountered. This increase in self-confidence allowed them to take more risks, meet with more success, and have a better attitude about reading. Also, as reading began to make sense, they enjoyed reading more.
Teachers in the students’ regular classrooms commented that the students were taking more active roles in reading group instruction than earlier in the year. These teachers also described instances during classroom reading instruction when resource room students shared the decoding of words using the compare/contrast strategy. No teacher suggested that these students became the best readers in the class, but many did notice a definite change in them. They reported that the students were more confident and exhibited more positive attitudes about reading. Certainly there were other factors contributing to the students’ improvements in these areas, but the compare/contrast decoding strategy was clearly related to the gains.

The Beginning of Congruence

The resource room teacher’s supervisor became enthusiastic about the decoding program and requested that videotapes of her teaching some lessons be made so they could be shared with other teachers in the district. He also encouraged district reading and resource room teachers to observe her teaching the Word Identification Program. In addition, she was invited to present inservice about the program for summer school teachers.

Most important of all is that each child in the resource room felt that the program had been of special value to him or her. For example, one girl in the class asked if she could have two copies of the key words list. One copy she said was for home, for her independent reading and so that she could teach her brother to read. The other copy was for her reading tutor whom she said, “should know about this stuff because she’s going to be a teacher.” Clearly, she found the analogy approach valuable. Rick expressed his feelings about the program in a letter to the resource room teacher: “Thanks for helping me to figure out hard words.” He, too, felt the program had benefitted him.

Beyond these two examples, many students discussed the usefulness of the program in their reports to the class about how they had been able to use the compare/contrast
strategy outside of the resource room. Students commented that they were able to use the strategy in other subject areas, and, perhaps just as valuable from a student’s point of view, one boy told of how he used the compare/contrast strategy while reading Batman comic books. Still others shared how they used the strategy to help them read street signs, advertisements, and other environmental print. Taken as a whole, these comments leave little doubt that the students believe that the Word Identification Program put them on the road to being successful readers.

A Decoding Program for the Rest of the Class, Too

Although the decoding program described in this article was designed for poor readers, we have discovered that the compare/contrast approach also works well for students with no reading difficulties. Some of the students in Benchmark’s summer school program, for example, are only slightly below grade level in reading, and a few are reportedly on grade level; yet using analogous words to decode unknown words is a strategy that seems to increase their confidence in dealing with text.

During summer school we provide an introduction to the compare/contrast strategy as a before-reading activity. We explain what the strategy is, why it is important, when to apply it, and how to do it. The teachers model the use of the strategy and provide opportunities for guided and independent practice with teacher feedback by introducing difficult words from the text on word cards. Teachers select the difficult words from a selection to be read and place each on an index card in a sentence. Beneath the targeted word on the card, the teacher writes the word divided into spelling pattern chunks, with analogous key words written below each chunk. For example, if the word was *impeachment*, the sentence on the index card might read: “The impeachment of the President resulted in a verdict of not guilty.” Near the bottom of the card, the word *impeachment* would be written in spelling pattern chunks, and below each pattern would be found a key word (for example, *him*, *beach*, and *tent*). Each day the teacher models the use of the compare/contrast strategy to decode one of the targeted words. Then the students are given the opportunity for guided practice with the remaining word cards.

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During this practice, students also are taught how to integrate the compare/contrast strategy with the use of context.

Before students begin reading a selection, teachers also introduce other important decoding principles related to difficult words in the text (such as chunking generalizations for various vowel-consonant patterns or the need to be flexible in applying key words).

Summary

In this paper we have described an analogy approach to decoding and shared our experiences of using this approach in a resource room. Informal observations and anecdotal reports suggest that students who receive instruction in this program improve in their ability to decode unknown words. In addition, there is reason to believe that the program also plays a significant role in building the confidence of poor readers and in helping them achieve a more positive attitude about reading. Suggestions for using the compare/contrast strategy with students other than poor readers were also provided.

Although the present report provides some initial evidence that the program can be beneficial to students in educational settings other than the one in which it was developed, there is a need for a more systematic examination of its effectiveness across settings. For now, however, the evidence shared here suggests a promising future for an analogy approach to decoding.

References


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A Decoding Program for Poor Readers—And the Rest of the Class, Too!


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Consultants for the development of the Benchmark Word Identification Program described in this paper were Richard C. Anderson and Patricia M. Cunningham. Their wisdom and support are gratefully acknowledged. The authors of the Word Identification Program, developed in collaboration with the staff of Benchmark School, are: Beginning Program, Marjorie A. Downer; Intermediate Program, Irene W. Gaskins. Research assistants for the research and development project were Robert W. Gaskins and Marlene Schommer. Editorial assistants for the revisions of the program were Anne Gutman, Alison Indrisano, and Sally Theilacker. A videotape and manual describing this program

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are available from the Center for the Study of Reading, 51 Gerty Drive, Champaign, IL 61820. A Teacher’s Manual for the program is available from Benchmark School, 2107 N. Providence Rd., Media, PA 19063.