Important Information About Nonsense Word Fluency

AKA: STOP THE NONSENSE!!!!

Nonsense words are used for assessment, not for instruction.

The DIBELS Nonsense Word Fluency (NWF) measure is a standardized, individually administered test of the alphabetic principle – including (1) letter-sound correspondence in which the letters represent the sounds most commonly associated with them and (2) the ability to blend sounds into words when the letters are representing their sounds most commonly associated with them (Kaminski and Good, 1996)..

The student is presented an 8.5" x 11" sheet of paper with randomly ordered VC and CVC nonsense words (e.g., sig, rav, ov) and asked to verbally produce the individual letter sounds in each word, or read the whole word.

For example, if the stimulus word is "pov" the student could say /p/ /o/ /v/ or say the word /pov/ to obtain a total of three letter-sounds correct. The student is allowed 1 minute to produce as many letter-sounds as he/she can, and the final score is the number of letter-sounds produced correctly in one minute.

Because the measure is fluency based, students should receive a higher score if they are phonologically recoding the word, as they will be more efficiently producing the letter sounds, and receive a lower score if they are providing letter sounds in isolation. The intent of this measure is that students are able to read unfamiliar words as whole words, not just name letter sounds as fast as they can.

There is a large body of evidence that supports the use of pseudowords (nonsense words) for assessment purposes. According to research (Ravthon, N., 2004) "pseudoword decoding is the best single predictor of word identification for poor and normal readers" and is the "most reliable indicator of reading disabilities" (Ravthon, N, 2004; Stanovich, 2000). The assessment is really that powerful and when you administer the assessment, you glean a lot of information on the child's mastery of the alphabetic principle as well as his/her ability to blend sounds into words.

Nonsense words are used more for assessment and not as an instructional target. In other words, the ultimate goal **is not** for students to read make believe words. The purpose of the assessment is two-fold. First, we want to know if the child knows the most common sounds for the letters and, second, we want to know if the child can blend the letters together to form words. Real words cannot be used because there would be no way of knowing whether the child is recognizing the word by sight, therefore, we are not isolating the skills that we wish to assess. It is important to think of the student's performance on the NWF as an "indicator" of the child's understanding of the alphabetic principle as well as the ability to blend sounds into word. The DIBELS Next is a screening assessment. The assessments are predictors of later reading performance. Below benchmark performance on the NWF assessment is an indicator that the student does not have mastery of the alphabetic principle and/or is not yet proficient at blending.

Use of Nonsense Word in Instruction

Let's use the medical model to help us understand the use of nonsense words in instruction. Last year I went to my family physician for a physical. A series of routine screening tests were performed. Based on the results of those tests, it was determined that I had high cholesterol. Now, I don't "work" on my cholesterol number. I work on the factors that contribute to a higher than desired cholesterol (diet, exercise).

The same holds true with the use of nonsense words. Students don't need to "work" on nonsense words. **They need to work on the skills necessary for quick and accurate decoding unknown words (alphabetic principle, blending).** It is always helpful to analyze a student's performance on this measure. Analysis of the errors as well as if and how the student blended words helps when planning intervention. See the sample chart below:

This student...	Example	Further Assessment	Instructional Focus
Reads the words sound-by-sound accurately (>90%)	/b/ /u/ /k/		•Blending sounds into words •Work with word families
Reads the words sound-by-sound, but is not accurate (<90%)	a /b/ /u/ /k/	Letter/sound Assessment to identify specific errors	•Mastery of sound- symbol correspondence •Blending using known letters/sounds
Reads the words sound-by-sound, then recodes with accuracy	/b/ /u/ /k/ /buk/		•Reading whole words
Reads the words sound-by-sound, then recodes, but is not accurate (<90%)	a /b/ /u/ /k/ /bak/	Letter/sound Assessment to identify specific errors	•Mastery of sound- symbol correspondence •Blending using known letters/sounds

Partially blends the word with accuracy (>90%)	/b/ /uk/		•Reading whole words
Partially blends the word, but is not accurate (<90%)	a /b/ /̸uk/	Letter/sound Assessment to identify specific errors	•Mastery of sound- symbol correspondence •Blending using known letters/sounds
Reads the whole word accurately	/buk/		•Reading connected text
Reads whole words, but is not accurate(<90%)	a /b̸k/	Letter/sound Assessment to identify specific errors	

So with this in mind, here are a few more thoughts and ideas:

1. It important to know that students who are automatic and accurate with their letters and sounds and who can blend sounds together will do well on the DIBELS Next NWF assessment even though nonsense words were never used during your instruction. Be sure your students are solid with their sound-symbol correspondence.
2. Your NWF data can be used to quickly identify sound errors as well as identify where your student falls on the word-blending continuum. You will want to use this data (as well as other data available to you) to group students into skill-based groups.
3. The progress monitoring component of the DIBELS Next NWF assessment is extremely valuable. You will want to be sure you progress monitor your students to ensure that they are progressing. You will want to change your instruction based on ongoing assessment.

The following is an article on Nonsense Words written by literacy expert, Dr. Timothy Shanahan:

On Teaching Nonsense Words

May 11, 2016

Lil Wayne can do rap, but he'd definitely be out of place at a Gospel Convention, sort of like a love affair with a happy ending in a Taylor Swift lyric.

So what's out of place in reading education?

My nominee is the act of teaching kids to read nonsense words. Don't do it. It doesn't belong (it may even be worse than orange and green together).

Why, you might ask, would anyone teach nonsense words? I attribute this all-too-common error to a serious misunderstanding of tests and testing.

Many years ago, researchers were interested in determining how well kids could decode. They decided upon lists of words that were graded in difficulty. The more words the students could read accurately, the better we assumed his/her decoding must be.

But, then they started to think: It's possible for kids to memorize a bunch of words. In fact, with certain high frequency words we tell kids to memorize them. If I flash the word "of" to a student and he/she reads it correctly, that might not be due to better phonics skills, but just because Johnny had that one drilled into long-term memory.

That means with word tests we can never be sure of how well kids can decode.

The solution: nonsense words tests. If we give kids lists of nonsense words, that is combinations of letters that fit English spelling patterns, but that aren't really words, then if students can read them they must have decoding skills, because no one in their right mind would teach these made up letter combinations to children.

Enter tests like DIBELS decoding measure. Tests designed to help determine quickly who needs more help with decoding. These aren't tests aimed at evaluating programs or teachers; they are diagnostic.

These tests work pretty well, too. Studies show a high correlation between performance on nonsense words and real words, and some of the time the nonsense word scores are more closely related with reading achievement than the word test scores!

But many schools are now using these to make judgments about teachers.

And, the teachers' reaction has been to teach nonsense words to the kids. Not just any nonsense words either; the specific nonsense words that show up on DIBELS. That means these teachers are making the test worthless. If kids are memorizing pronunciations for those nonsense words, then the tests no longer can tell how well the kids can decode.

We can do better. Please do not use these kinds of tests to make judgments about teachers, it just encourages foolish responses on their parts. And, please do not teach these nonsense words to the kids. It is harmful to kids. It definitely doesn't belong here.

And here's another article:

Like many early literacy assessments, DIBELs uses nonsense words to assess student ability to decode. This is a well-validated practice and can provide useful information for diagnostic purposes. But diagnosis is not treatment and nonsense words should never be used for instruction. When a doctor suspects a broken bone, that doctor will often order an X-Ray. If the X-Ray shows a broken bone, the doctor treats the bone with a cast, a wrap or surgery, not with another X-Ray. So it is with nonsense words - they point to a problem, but are not to be used to treat the problem.

Why not?

Because learning to read is an act of communication and communication only happens with real words. In order to develop skilled decoding abilities, children need to be exposed to lots of real words. Real words have a certain set of finite spelling patterns. Yes, in English this is more complex than in most languages and this is a source of much difficulty, but still the patterns are there. The human brain is a pattern identifying machine. And young minds are particularly adept at intuiting patterns. The detecting of patterns in writing is mediated by the child's oral language. A young developing reader learns that the word "man" begins with the sound "mmm" and then learns that that sound can be represented by the letter "m." This can only happen through exposure to real words that are in the child's oral vocabulary.

As we expose children to real words, they get more information to store in the pattern detecting parts of their brain. We can expose the children to words in isolation, in real reading contexts, in word families, or as onsets and rimes (sp+ot), but no matter how we are presenting words to children, we must be presenting real words, so that children can discern the patterns. Of, course we can also teach those patterns explicitly through word families and spelling instruction.

Literacy researcher, Marilyn Jager Adams says that, no matter how we are exposing children to real words, we can optimize student understanding by making sure that the children see the word, say the word, understand the word and know its meaning. All of these contribute to a child learning a word and building the ability to decode the word and other words with similar patterns.

Of course, not all English words follow regular patterns, so sight word instruction is also key, especially for function words necessary for early reading like *the, of, was, do*. These words should be the focus of early instruction and learned by sight.

Nonsense words do not give children the opportunity to intuit patterns. They violate patterns and make learning to decode more difficult. This characteristic makes them useful for diagnostic tests, but disqualifies them for instruction.

Literacy researcher, Tim Shanahan, believes that the spread of the use of nonsense words can be attributed to administrators mistakenly using diagnostic tests to evaluate teacher performance. If teachers are going to be assessed on these tests, then teachers can hardly be

faulted for teaching kids how to read nonsense words. Simply put, using diagnostic tests in any way to evaluate teachers is, well, nonsense. On using nonsense words in instruction, Shanahan says simply, "Don't do it."

As Adams puts it, "The brain does not grow block by block from bottom up. It grows through its own efforts to communicate and find coherence within itself." Nonsense words interfere with our natural desire to communicate and lack any coherence with a child's spoken language.

Stop the nonsense!

Thank you!