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Teaching Tips

SSSLIDE into Reading Big Words! A Strategy for Decoding Multisyllabic Words

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ABSTRACT

The ability to decode multisyllabic words significantly impacts fluency, automaticity, vocabulary, and comprehension ability. As students advance to the intermediate grades, this skill becomes increasingly critical as they are exposed to a greater volume of informational text containing a higher frequency of multisyllabic and unfamiliar words. Given the rising number of older children reading below grade level, it is essential for intermediate-grade teachers to employ effective and efficient strategies to teach multisyllabic word decoding. This article introduces SSSLIDE, a straightforward strategy that can be taught in just twelve 30-minute lessons, empowering students to decode most multisyllabic words and ultimately to make sense of what they read.

KEYWORDS

syllables; syllabication; structural analysis; phonics; struggling readers; word-solving strategies; science of reading; COVID-19

Reading tutors in Georgia are seldom short of work these days: Only 61% of Georgia fourth graders demonstrated reading ability at above the basic level in 2022. This was 2% lower than in 2019 (National Assessment of Educational Progress, n.d.), most likely due to the interruption in early grades education during the COVID-19 pandemic (Gray et al., 2023). With 39% of fourth-graders unable to read words well enough to identify simple, literal details in text, illiteracy is at a crisis level in our state.

Chall et al. (1990) used the term *fourth-grade slump* to explain the critical transition in reading skills as children progressed through school. She pointed to the greater number of multisyllabic words in non-fiction text, particularly as a possible reason for this trend. Other researchers have validated the importance of multisyllabic word reading in student success in the upper elementary grades (Ehri, 2005; Nagy et al., 2006). One reason students may struggle to read multisyllabic words well is that they have not been systematically taught to do so. This is not surprising, given that the guidelines on teaching syllabication are more general than structured series of steps (see Bear et al., 2015; Fountas & Pinnell, 2017; Juel, 1988; Pressley, 2006). A recent EBSO search of peer-reviewed and non-peer-reviewed articles within the last five years containing "syllabication" or "multisyllabic words" in the title yielded no results in the first case and only rationale for teaching the skill, but with no specific methods for doing so, in the latter.

Caleb (pseudonym) represented a typical striving reader. His parents explained that Caleb had spent his entire first-grade year and part of second grade online, with inconsistent instruction in reading, and that he was now struggling to read at grade level.

Like many fourth- and fifth-grade struggling readers with whom I've worked in the past, an assessment of Caleb's oral reading ability quickly revealed the problem: although he could decode most single-syllable words, he had few strategies for decoding multisyllabic words. As is

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common with children facing this challenge, Caleb would skip unfamiliar words or read the first part of the word and guess at the rest.

What Science Tells Us About Learning to Read

The ability to make meaning from text—to elicit information and make personal connections (Rosenblatt, 1978)—underlies success in every subject area. However, to make meaning from text, the reader must possess the ability to decode text and read with automaticity (Adams, 1990; Ehri, 1995). For word reading to become automatic, children need to know not only how to map graphemes (letter patterns) to phonemes (letter sounds) but also how to break larger words into the smaller parts to facilitate reading. Instruction on how to do this is crucial for struggling readers (Bhattacharya & Ehri, 2004; Moats, 2004; Moats & Foorman, 2003; Shelfelbine, 1990), including English language learners (Vaughn et al., 2005).

In this article, I will explain a strategy I developed to help Caleb decode multisyllabic words quickly and accurately in just a few weeks. For Caleb and other students experiencing the fourth-grade slump (Chall et al., 1990), such strategies may be key to advancing their reading abilities and future academic success.

The SSSLIDE Strategy

Like many post-pandemic teachers currently teaching the intermediate grades, I had limited time to help Caleb catch up to grade level. It made sense, then, to develop an approach that was not only sequenced from simplest to more difficult word-solving skills (Moats, 2004) but also focused on the grapheme patterns that would help him solve the most words as quickly as possible.

In each 30-minute lesson, I used explicit instructional methods (Archer & Hughes, 2011; Mesmer & Griffith, 2005/2006). I explained and modeled, then had Caleb work with my assistance, and finally had him demonstrate independently what he had learned. To make the task of dividing words easier, I provided lists of words in large font and with spaces between each letter. I set mastery at the ability to decode 80% of multisyllabic words within each category (Black & Wiliam, 1996). The sequence of my lessons, all which built upon each other, formed the acronym of SSSLIDE:

Search for word parts that you already know.

Search for VC-e, CV-r, and C-le syllables.

Swoop together common consonant digraphs, diphthongs, and vowel teams.

Label vowels and consonants beginning with the first vowel.

Identify if the pattern is VCCV or VCV.

Divide the word according to the most common pattern: VC/CV or V/CV.

Evaluate the word.

Step 1: Search for Word Parts That You Already Know

The easiest way to divide long words is by separating the recognizable word parts within them. These word parts may be compound or derivational. Compound words like *hotdog* or *mailbox* are easy to divide without needing knowledge of syllable rules. According to McGregor et al. (2010), these words make up as much as 30% of the English language. The same study found that 28% of words are derivational, containing recognizable roots flanked by affixes on one or both sides, such as *uncomfortable*, *swimming*, and *playful*. Generally, these words can be easy solved by separating

the prefixes and suffixes from the base word. Just 20 prefixes make up 97% of English words with prefixes, and 20 suffixes account for 93% of words with suffixes (White et al., 1989). It made sense to review or teach on the spot, if necessary, the most common prefixes and suffixes, as they often indicate where a word can be divided at the beginning (prefixes) or the end (suffixes). I provided Caleb with a list of some of the most common prefixes and suffixes (Lane et al., 2009; see Figure 1) to scaffold this process and, in our first lesson, had him draw a box around the small words, prefixes, and suffixes that he saw. Recognizing compound words and derivative prefixes or suffixes became the first step of the SSSLIDE strategy: Search for word parts you already know.

Figure 1: Common Prefixes and Suffixes (Lane et al., 2009)

Common Prefixes	Common Suffixes
in	al
re	tion
de	sion
dis	ate
en	ly
ex	able
un	ment
pre	er
non	ent

Step 2: Search for VC-e, CV-r, and C-le Patterns

I found that Step 1 alone seemed to help Caleb to solve most long words. However, there are other rule-governed ways of dividing syllables, and some students need to understand these patterns to decode multisyllabic words (Blevins, 2017; Moats & Tolman, 2009; Yampolky & Waters, 2002). Teaching Caleb to spot VC-e, CV-r, and C-le patterns made up the next three lessons.

If searching for compound and derivational words does not solve the word, the next step for a student is to identify the syllable type and follow its most common division pattern. There are six syllable types: vowel-consonant-e (VC-e), consonant-vowel-r (CVr), and consonant-le (C-le), closed, open, and vowel teams. Each syllable type should be taught separately until mastery before going on to the next type (Bhattacharya & Ehri, 2004).

VC-e, CVr, and C-le are all syllable types that mostly follow regular pronunciation and division rules (Gates & Yale, 2011). Multisyllabic words that end with the VC-e syllables are divided before the consonant preceding the vowel sound, such as in the word *a/live*. If the VC-e syllable is in the middle of the word, then it is divided after the e, as in the word *ab/so/lute/ly*. I told Caleb to think of VC-e words as mini silent e words that he could search for and draw boxes around to divide the word.

CVr syllables, also called r-controlled vowels, are divided before the consonant, such as in the word *con/duc/tor*, and, when the pattern occurs in the middle, after the r, such as in the word *mi/ser/ly*. Like with VC-e words, I told Caleb to look for mini r-controlled words to box.

In C-le syllables, such as the final syllable in *can/dle*, the division pattern is before the first consonant. This pattern occurs only at the end of words, and I taught Caleb to draw boxes around them as well. The second step in the SSSLIDE strategy became to search for VC-e, CVr, and C-le word parts.

Step 3: Swoop Together Common Consonant Digraphs, Diphthongs, and Vowel Teams

Closed syllables are the most common orthographic unit in English, making up about 43% of words (Stanback, 1992). Closed syllables have one vowel sound, pronounced as a short vowel, followed by a consonant sound, and most closed syllable words are divided after the consonant following the first vowel (VC/CV), such as in the word *plas/tic*. Open-syllable words also follow a regular division pattern. These syllables end with a vowel and can be recognized by a pattern of VCV sounds. About seventy-five percent of the time, these syllables are divided after the first vowel (V/CV), such as in the word *to/ma/to* (Stanback, 1992). Both closed and open syllable patterns work by coding the vowel and consonant sounds, starting with the first vowel sound in the word.

Whether open or closed, children need to understand that syllable rules are based on vowel and consonant *sounds* not on vowel or consonant letters. Therefore, I teach them to "swoop" together two or more graphemes that represent one phoneme before applying the syllable rule. This applies to sounds that are made by consonant digraphs, diphthongs, and vowel teams. For example, in the word *mushroom*, the *sh* is a digraph which counts as one consonant sound and must be swooped together for the closed syllable pattern (VC/CV) to work in dividing the word. In the word *season*, the *ea* needs to be swooped together for the most common open syllable pattern to work (V/CV). In the word *allowance*, the *ow* diphthong needs to be swooped together for the V/CV open syllable division to work in the second syllable. Given our limited time and the need for efficient word-solving, I provided Caleb with a list of all the consonant digraphs and diphthongs and only the most common vowel teams (Fry, 2004; see Figure 2). This served as a scaffold as he implemented this step.

Figure 2: Common Consonant Digraphs, Diphthongs, and Vowel Teams (Fry, 2004)

Consonant Digraphs	Diphthongs	Vowel Teams
ch	ow	ai
sh	oo	ay
th	ou	ee
wh	oi	ea
ph	oy	oa

When considering vowel team syllables, I realized there was no need to teach these separately from the other syllable types. Nor was there any reason to teach complicated patterns like VCCCV patterns and the like. If Caleb remembered to swoop consonant digraphs, diphthongs, and vowel teams together, the division patterns of VC/CV and V/CV almost always worked. Thus, "S" for "swoop" became the third step in the SSSLIDE strategy: Swoop together consonant digraphs, diphthongs, and vowel teams. Swooping common digraphs, diphthongs, and vowel teams made up three more lessons.

After nine thirty-minute lessons (one each on identifying words inside of words, common prefixes, common suffixes, VC-e, CV-r, C-le patterns, and swooping common digraphs, diphthongs, and vowel teams), Caleb was quickly gaining confidence in his ability to tackle big words. However, there were still a few more strategies needed to ensure his ability to solve every multisyllabic word he might encounter.

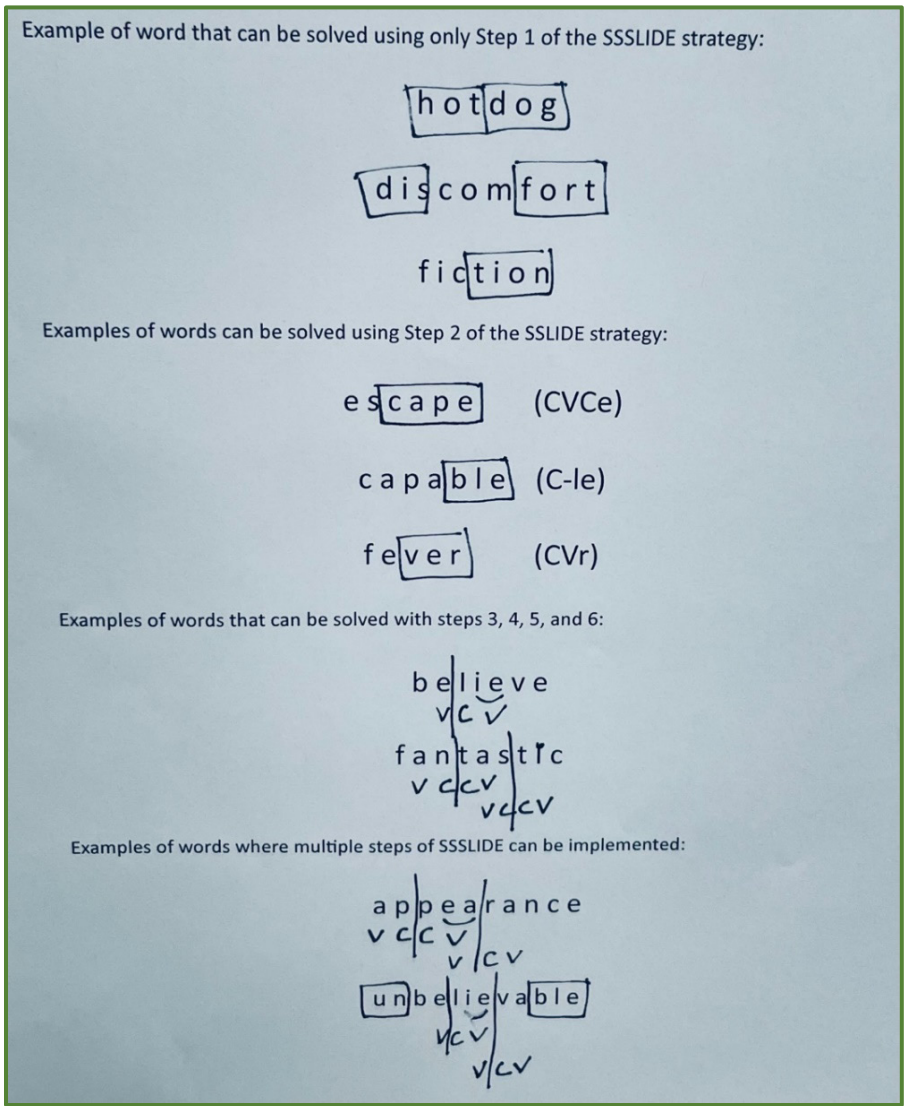
Step 4: Label Vowels and Consonant Sounds Beginning with the First Vowel Sound and Step 5: Identify if the Pattern is VCCV or VCV

I began by teaching Caleb to label vowels and consonants by writing a V or a C under each grapheme beginning with the first vowel and note which of the two patterns he saw. Both steps were taught in the same lesson.

Step 6: Divide the Word According to the Most Common Pattern: VC/CV or V/CV

To complete the word-solving process, I taught Caleb that if the pattern is VCCV, it generally divides after the first consonant. If it is VCV, it will generally divide after the first vowel, and, if not, after the first consonant. If other syllables need to continue to be divided to solve the word, the student can repeat these steps beginning with the second vowel. This step made up another lesson. I followed this with one last lesson in which he practiced solving several examples of multisyllabic words by employing all the strategies he had learned. See examples of the SSSLIDE strategy in action in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Examples of SSSLIDE in Action



Step 7: Evaluate the Word

No matter what strategy is employed, the student will "evaluate" the word by putting each part of the word together in one whole word aloud and noting if it makes sense. This step is important as the whole purpose of the SSSLIDE strategy is not to solve a word, per se, but to make meaning of print.

Conclusion

Reading researcher Linnea Erhi (2005) said, "Given that there are multiple ways to read words, consider which way makes text reading most efficient" (p. 170). I similarly explain to children that they have many tools available to them to solve a word and that it really doesn't matter how they divide it as long as they can read the word. For example, whether the word *capable* is divided *cap/a/ble* or *cap/able*, the word will still be recognizable. I also reminded Caleb that he did not have to divide syllables from the beginning of the word to the end. Rather he could start at the end of the word or even in the middle.

While the process of SSSLIDE may seem daunting at first, children need to understand that they do not need to go through every step of SSSLIDE every time. If they find word parts they know (Step 1) or the simple VC-e, Cvr, or C-le patterns (Step 2) those steps are usually sufficient. Children also need to understand that they will not have do SSSLIDE every time they try to decode a long word, because once they do it a few times, those words, and others like them, will become part of their sight word vocabulary.

If I had had more time with Caleb, I might have taught him to recognize some of the less common vowel teams and to use less common syllable division patterns. However, I predict that his increased time spent reading will provide more opportunities to practice decoding long words and that, through practice, those words will eventually become automatic and part of his sight word vocabulary (Ehri, 2005).

Teachers of struggling readers like Caleb need practical and efficient solutions for catching children up to grade level. Strategies like SSSLIDE have the potential to pull Caleb and other struggling readers out of the "slump" and set them on their way to academic success.

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