

Green Eggs and Ham:

Or The Case for Phonics Instruction and Decodable Text

By Matthew Davis

How much does a beginning reader need to know about English letter-sound correspondences to read an easy children's book? More than you might think.

Consider this: *Green Eggs and Ham*, the Doctor Seuss classic, contains only 47 different words, most of which are common, high-frequency words. Here is the complete vocabulary of the story:

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|-------------|-----------|-----------|
| 1. a | 17. ham | 33. say |
| 2. am | 18. here | 34. see |
| 3. and | 19. house | 35. so |
| 4. anywhere | 20. I | 36. thank |
| 5. be | 21. if | 37. that |
| 6. boat | 22. in | 38. them |
| 7. car | 23. let | 39. there |
| 8. could | 24. like | 40. they |
| 9. dark | 25. may | 41. train |
| 10. do | 26. me | 42. try |
| 11. eat | 27. mouse | 43. tree |
| 12. eggs | 28. not | 44. will |
| 13. fox | 29. on | 45. with |
| 14. goat | 30. or | 46. would |
| 15. good | 31. rain | 47. you |
| 16. green | 32. Sam | |

These 47 words are artfully arranged and re-arranged in repetitive but interesting patterns. Because there are so few words, because many of the words are quite common, and because the words are arranged in repetitive patterns, this is exactly the sort of story you might think would be good to give to a beginning reader. In fact, it is exactly the sort of story routinely recommended by “whole language” advocates. But if you look a little more closely and direct your attention to the sounds and spellings used in those 47 words, you will find that there is a great deal of code complexity in this simple little book.

In *Green Eggs and Ham*, 8 phonemes (or sounds) are spelled in two different ways, one phoneme is spelled in four different ways, and one phoneme is spelled in five different ways. The consonants are only moderately challenging:

The /g/ phoneme is spelled two ways: **green** and **egg**

The /k/ phoneme is spelled two ways: **thank**, **car**

The /l/ phoneme is spelled two ways: **like**, **will**

The /w/ phoneme is spelled two ways: **with**, any**w**here.

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The /ie/ phoneme is spelled two ways: **like, try**

The /oo/ phoneme is spelled two ways: **do, you**

The /ou/ phoneme is spelled two ways: **would, good**

The /oe/ phoneme is spelled two ways: **goat, so**

The /ae/ phoneme is spelled four ways: **they, may, train, there***

The /ee/ phoneme is spelled five ways: **green, here***, anywhere, **eat, me**

When you, as an adult, read *Green Eggs and Ham*, you're probably not aware of all these different spellings or of the complex mental tasks you are performing to translate these spellings into sounds. You don't notice that you are reading five different sets of letters and turning all five into the /ee/ sound. You don't notice that you are translating the letter 'y' into the /ie/ sound when you read *try* and translating the same letter into the /ee/ sound when you read *anywhere*. You don't notice that you are performing an even more complicated disambiguating task with the letter 'o', which, in this book alone, stands for the /oe/ sound in *so*, the /oo/ sound in *do*, and the /o/ sound in *not*—not to mention its use in vowel digraphs in words like *you* and *goat*. You don't notice these things because you have automatized your decoding skills to the point where you are no longer even aware of them. But in fact your mind is processing these bits of information.

Our Dr. Seuss story, which at first glance looked to be ideal for a beginning reader, turns out on closer examination to be startlingly complex. It requires a great deal of knowledge of letter-sound relationships to read the story. (That is, to *read it phonetically from the page* as opposed to memorizing whole words or memorizing the story.) Nor is *Green Eggs and Ham* in any way unusual; pick up almost any book and you will find a lot of code complexity, including sounds spelled several different ways and letters that stand for different sounds in different words. Such complexities are quite common because many of our most common words (including *the, a, of, some, one, no, and is*) are written using alternative spellings, or spellings that differ from the most common spellings. Try to write a couple of sentences without using a single spelling alternative and you will see that code complexity is extremely difficult to avoid.

What does this little analysis of *Green Eggs and Ham* teach us? First of all, it reveals why an explicit and systematic approach to teaching English letter-sound correspondences is important. Without good phonics instruction, many students are likely to be staggered by the amount of letter-sound complexity in the simplest of stories. Even with good phonics instruction, mastery of the English spelling code does not come easily (or naturally). In addition, Dr. Seuss's text reveals that many letter-sound correspondences need to be taught before children are asked to read even the simplest texts on their own. A corollary to this last point is that there is a good reason for starting with so-called "decodable texts," which use only the letter-sound relationships that students have already mastered. Rarely is it enough to know only the most common way of writing each sound. In fact, even the shortest and simplest English texts contain a lot of spelling alternatives. As educators, we need to bear in mind that reading is not natural. It is in fact a highly unnatural act that requires a great deal of knowledge of the English spelling code.