The Power of Continuous Blending: How Do We Use Connected Phonation to Support Decoding?

In our fourth installment of the blog series Structured Literacy: Unpacking Eight Key Questions for Transforming Reading Instruction and Outcomes for Readers, we're thrilled that Dr. Valentina Contesse of the University of Florida Literacy Institute (UFLI) is once again sharing her expertise with us.

To catch up on earlier blog posts in the series, start with the introduction, “From Guided Reading to a Structured-Literacy Approach: My Journey as an Educator.”

In a recent blog post, “Phonological and Phonemic Awareness: How Do We Bridge Research to Practice?” I discussed some essential instructional practices that support students' phonemic awareness and word reading skills. In this blog post, we will home in on one of these practices—connected phonation.

As a teacher and tutor, I have seen firsthand the power of connected phonation in helping students who are learning to read. Even when my students were able to correctly identify all grapheme-phoneme correspondences in a word, many continued to have difficulty blending these phonemes together to read the word. By modeling and encouraging the use of connected phonation, I've been able to support the decoding skills of many students. It's always a good thing when a simple tweak to our instruction can make such a difference in the decoding progress of our students!

Before we delve into connected phonation, let's foreground this discussion by talking briefly about continuous sounds versus stop sounds.

**Continuous Sounds Versus Stop Sounds**

*Continuous sounds* can be stretched out without distortion. *Stop sounds* cannot be stretched out without distortion.

- Continuous Sounds: all vowels, /i/, /I/, /l/, /n/, /r/, /s/, /v/, /w/, /y/, /z/
- Stop Sounds: /b/, /k/, /d/, /ɡ/, /h/, /j/, /p/, /t/.

**What is Connected Phonation?**

*Connected phonation* is a decoding, or word reading, strategy that teaches students to stretch out continuous sounds to support their blending. This practice is also referred to as *continuous blending* (CORE Teaching Reading Sourcebook, 2018).

The goal of connected phonation is to avoid pauses between sounds. This decoding strategy helps students learn to blend individual
phonemes together when reading a word by not pausing between phonemes. By continuously blending phonemes, students that use connected phonation are less likely to forget the beginning sound of a word they are reading (Weisberg & Savard, 1993).

Connected Phonation Examples:

- /mmmāăăp/, “map” instead of /m/ + /ă/ + /p/, “map”
- /ssūūūnnn/, “sun” instead of /s/ + /ū/ + /n/, “sun”
- /fffflllĭĭĭp/, “flip” instead of /f/ + /l/ + /ĭ/ + /p/, “flip”

While we commonly see words like “cat” or “big” used as practice for early decodable words, these examples are bookended by stop sounds, making it difficult for students to continuously hold the sounds across each phoneme. This in turn can make it difficult for some students to blend the sounds to decode the word. In early decoding practice, it is beneficial to use words that begin with continuous sounds. This is one reason why the sequence in which sounds are introduced is such an important aspect of instruction.

Although the practice of connected phonation is taught with words that begin with a continuous sound, the benefits of this practice extend further. Research has shown that skills learned from this decoding strategy can transfer to support students’ decoding of words that begin with stop sounds (Gonzalez-Frey & Ehri, 2020).

Using Connected Phonation in Decoding Activities

Connected phonation can be used by students during various decoding activities, one of which is a blending drill. During a blending drill, students practice decoding words presented by the teacher. The goal of this instructional activity is decoding automaticity.

During a blending drill, it is helpful for the teacher or student to use their finger while decoding using connected phonation.

First, the teacher or student moves their finger from left to right while tracking underneath each grapheme-phoneme correspondence in the word: /mmmāăăp/

Then, the teacher or student sweeps their finger from left to right underneath the word while blending all the sounds to read the word: “map”

In the video seen here, the teacher is supporting the students with their connected phonation using the finger sweep technique. In addition, you can see an example of a practice word with a stop sound. Students immediately connect that stop sound to the vowel (which is a continuous sound) to support their blending.
Word chains can be used during blending drill activities. In order for students to use the connected phonation strategy, word chains should include words that begin with continuous sounds. When developing word chains, it is important to only change one phoneme at a time like in the examples below.

Word Chain Examples:

- mat → sat → fat → rat → rap → lap
- flap → flip → slip → slap → snap → snip

This University of Florida Literacy Institute video provides more information about word chains.

**Conclusion**

Connected phonation is an effective strategy for supporting students' decoding and is one of the many practices that can help develop strong foundational reading skills. It is important to use a gradual release of responsibility while teaching students to use connected phonation. Along with explicit teacher modeling of the decoding strategy, students need various opportunities to practice this strategy with activities like a blending drill. With some simple adjustments to our instruction, we can make a big difference for our students.

**References**


**About the Author**

Dr. Valentina Contesse is a clinical assistant professor of special education in the School of Special Education, School Psychology, and Early Childhood Studies at the University of Florida. She works for the University of Florida Literacy Institute
(UFLI) and helped develop the UFLI Virtual Teaching Resource Hub. Dr. Contesse supports the coordination of professional development for preservice and practicing teachers focused on evidence-based reading instruction and provides school-based implementation support.

Dr. Contesse began her teaching career after earning her undergraduate degree in elementary education and graduate degree in special education. She has previous elementary teaching experience as both a special education and general education teacher in inclusive K–4 classrooms. Her research interests include early literacy intervention, implementation of evidence-based instructional practices, teacher preparation in reading, and the effects of performance feedback on teacher practices. Through continued research and teacher training efforts, Dr. Contesse hopes to build stronger connections between research and practice, to ultimately help improve academic and social outcomes for all students. Follow her on Twitter at @ValContesse.