

First Rule of Reading: Keep Your Eyes on the Words

By Linda Farrell

I've worked with hundreds of struggling readers ages 5 to 81. Almost all students I meet who have decoding weaknesses share a common behavior. Can you guess what it is? They look up from the page before they finish reading a word or sentence.

Many just glance at the word and guess what it is as they look at me for approval. Others may look at the word more carefully, yet they still look at me for approval after they say what they think the word is. A few look at the word before staring at the ceiling or somewhere in space while they try to figure out what the word is. Every elementary school teacher and every reading interventionist I meet recognizes these behaviors and can associate them with specific students.

Teachers often ask how to help their struggling readers. My first response is, "Make sure all students keep their eyes on the words the entire time they read." I also suggest that teachers avoid saying things like "good job" or "nice work" when the student looks up for approval. The only time a student should look up from the page when reading is to say, "I need help with that word." In that case, the teacher either helps the student sound out the word or gives the word if it is too difficult for the student to decode.

Many teachers tell us they need to give students, especially struggling readers, positive feedback for the student's self-esteem and confidence. At first blush that seems reasonable because beginning and struggling readers want to know if they read correctly, and teachers want students to feel good about reading. In reality, teachers are training students to rely on them for affirmation rather than helping students develop confidence in their emerging skills. Instead of saying "good job" or "nice work" when a student looks up, the teacher can reinforce the importance of looking at the words by saying, "Remember to keep your eyes on the words when you read. I'll let you know when I need to help you."

Recently I was in a school to work with students, and the reading coach was with me all day. I started with four students in a low second-grade reading group who were working on phonics at the silent "e" level. These students had scored between 28 and 42 words-correct-per-minute on mid-year *DIBELS* Oral Reading Fluency (benchmark is 68). Their accuracy ranged from 76 to 91 percent. They were reading decodable text focusing on words with silent "e." All four students had the habit of looking up for approval at the end of each sentence. And, not surprisingly, all four often misread the final words in the sentence. I had them practice keeping their eyes on the words for all four or five sentences that were on the page. Their habit of looking up was not easy to change. By the end of 25 minutes, albeit with conscious effort on the students' part, all four were keeping their heads down and their eyes on the words while they read. Just this small change in behavior noticeably increased their accuracy.

The reading coach and I spent the afternoon working one-on-one with four third-grade and fourth-grade students who had the lowest reading scores in their grade. They were all receiving decoding intervention. We assessed the students' decoding skills by having them read words in isolation. None of the students did more than glance at words and look up before saying the word, and none read more than 18 of 30 decodable and high-frequency words accurately. It was apparent that these students weren't looking at the words long enough to apply any decoding strategies. We worked with each student for about 20 minutes, reviewing the short vowel sounds and encouraging them to keep their eyes on the words. After this short time, they were all able to read with greater accuracy and more confidence. None had fully overcome their habit of taking their eyes off the words before finishing reading, but all were catching themselves every time they did look up.

Early in the day, the reading coach remarked that she was surprised at my “fixation” on teaching students to look at the words until they finished reading. At the end of the day, she told me she fully understood why I was such a zealot about insisting students keep their eyes on the page. Yes, I am fixated on having students look at the words when they read because we can read only when we look at the words.

I implore all kindergarten, first-grade, and second-grade teachers—as well as reading interventionists—to teach students to keep their eyes on the words so that they do not have to later struggle with breaking a habit that hampers effective, efficient reading. After all, the first step good readers take is to look at the words they are reading. In my experience, many struggling readers have difficulties partly because they never mastered this first step.

How to Help Students Keep Their Eyes on the Words

By Linda Farrell

An almost universal habit that struggling readers exhibit is looking up from the words when reading. In my previous article, I stressed the importance of teaching students to keep their eyes on the words when they read. I also noted that for almost all students, accuracy improves almost immediately when they stop looking up and start looking at the word in order to use decoding strategies.

A number of teachers responded to the previous article. Many wrote that they had not been aware how often their students looked to them for approval or for help with reading. Several teachers asked what they could do to help their students develop the habit of keeping their eyes on the words when they read. This article offers some suggestions.

Helping students change the “looking up” habit requires diligent attention and patience, patience, patience. It helps to understand the different reasons students look up so teachers can respond in the most effective way.

Primary Reasons Students Look Up

Students look up from the page for three primary reasons:

1. **Students look to the teacher for approval.** These students look directly at the teacher and they wait for the teacher to say “good job” or something similar.
2. **Students look up to signal the teacher that they don’t know the word and need help.** These students also look directly at the teacher. In many classrooms, the teacher or another classmate tells the student the word.
3. **Students look up to think about what the word might be.** These students are trying to pull the word from memory and generally look into space, not directly at anyone.

How To Help Students Who Look Up While Reading

1. Students Who Look Up for Approval

Helping students who look up for approval is the easiest of the three behaviors to correct. Please don't mistake "easiest of the three" to mean easy. As with any habit, this one can take time to change.

One respondent to the first post wrote about a technique we also use: "We emphasize maintaining focus on the word from beginning to end with a few simple techniques. For those students having difficulty breaking the habit, I've tried standing/sitting behind them while they read! Worked like a charm --- it was very evident to the student how often they broke focus, how reliant they were on teacher approval and how self-sufficient they became so swiftly."

Some students look up for approval just two or three words before they finish reading. Often, this causes them to misread one or more of the final words. To change this habit, every time a student looks up before finishing reading, the teacher reminds the student he or she looked up, and then has the student reread. The teacher has the student reread whether all the words were read correctly or not. Doing this each time a student looks up will foster the habit of keeping eyes on the page at all times. We have found that if we have the student reread only when words are misread, the habit doesn't change nearly as fast, if at all.

Some students have a difficult time recognizing that they look up before finishing the sentence. In this case, the teacher can put a hand lightly on the student's head and tell the student not to look up until the teacher takes the hand away. Another technique is to have the student say "period" when he or she comes to the end of the sentence, then tap a fist on the desk before looking up. We have used both these techniques successfully with a number of students.

2. Students Who Look Up Because They Want the Teacher To Tell Them the Word

Students who look up because they want the teacher to tell them the word need to be reminded to keep their eyes on the word. The teacher can say, "Remember that you need to say 'Word, please.' Start from the beginning and say 'Word, please' when you come to any words you don't know." Many students say "Word, please," but still look up as they say it. Teachers need to remind students to keep their eyes on the word even after they ask for help, and then follow up by having the student repeat "Word, please" with eyes on the word.

After a student asks for help with a specific word, the teacher can elect to (1) have the student sound out the word if the spelling patterns are ones the student should know or (2) provide the word if the student is not expected to know how to read it.

3. Students Who Look Up To Think about the Word

Students who look up to think about the word are perhaps the most difficult to train to keep their eyes on the page. These students generally have poor decoding skills and strong language skills. Their experience has taught them that glancing at the word and thinking about possible words is easier and sometimes more successful for them than taking the time to decode the word.

Students who look up to think about the word are different from those who look up because they want teacher approval or want to be told the word. They think that they can "find the word in their heads." Therefore, teachers need to ask these students to continue to look at the word as they try to read it. If they can't read the word, they need to say "Word, please."

Making Sure Students Develop the Habit of Looking at Words When they Read

Kindergarten and first grade teachers can keep the “looking up” habit from developing. First, they can teach that accuracy is critical when reading. All teachers can help students achieve accuracy by insisting that they look at words the entire time they read. When any student misreads a word, the teacher can stop the student at the end of the sentence or word list, and follow these steps:

1. Tell the student the number of words read correctly (or say, “You read perfectly up to this word” as you point at the missed word).
2. Ask the student to sound out the word if it is decodable or give the word if the student hasn’t learned its spelling patterns.
3. Have the student read the sentence again (up to three times) until he or she reads the sentence accurately without looking up.

Teachers can also stop teaching strategies that encourage students to take their eyes off the word. These ineffective strategies include: “guess based on context,” “look at the first letter and think of a word that fits,” and “look at the picture.” We wish all educators understood that these strategies encourage the student to look away from the words as they consider how to guess what the word might be. No good reader looks away from the words when reading.

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