

the *Educational Research Analysts* MEL GABLERS' *Newsletter*

Inside:
Getting Smart
on Evolution

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ESL students lose, publishers save.

TEA CONFLICT OF INTEREST?

by Neal Frey

— the issue —

R real phonics decodability means that students learn the sound of each letter or combination of letters in each phonetically regular word, before reading that word. Real phonics never teaches phonetically regular words as sight words. Many scientific studies confirm the superiority of this method. Phony phonics claims to "include" phonics. Students learn only some sounds in a word before memorizing it, overloading their memories before learning to read well. If a program teaches phonetically regular words as sight words, it is not real phonics, whatever its billing. Foes of real phonics try either to lower the *percent* decodability required, or to water down the *definition* of decodability.

"Thank you for this service!!!"

— Texas ESL teacher, responding to our comparison chart on Grade 1 ESL programs submitted for Texas adoption

— the problem —

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) has tried both ploys recently. In the submission of regular Reading programs in 1999, TEA used the real phonics definition of decodability, but said that Texas required just 51% decodability. The State Board of Education (SBOE) vetoed that, insisting on at least 80%. So, for the 2003 English as a Second Language (ESL) readers, TEA "revised" the definition of decodability, supposedly "to more closely reflect previous Board action." But in fact, it subtly *debased* the 1999 definition of decodability, to *include phonetically regular words taught as sight words*. Under that guise, the state review panel and TEA declared the 2003 ESL offerings "100% decodable."

Which was far from true. As our comparison chart shows on page 4 here, Grade 1 ESL programs fell short even of 80% overall decodability. That chart exhaustively summarizes how decodable each Grade 1 ESL program submitted for Texas adoption really was. Confronted with this undeniable evidence, TEA lapsed into redundancy: ESL programs define decodability differently, TEA said, because ... because ESL programs define decodability differently. All the learning needs of English learners, posed to justify lower ESL decodability, were equally true of native English speakers learning to read. Inferior decodability is unacceptable for native English speakers, TEA logic ran, but is good enough for English learners.

"Thank you so much for doing this. it helps teachers make a more informed decision!"

— Texas ESL teacher, requesting documentation for our chart

— the question —

In 2003, TEA "advocates for children" redefined decodability to make English learners second-class students, sparing publishers the cost of raising their ESL Readers to 80% real phonics decodability. TEA tried to spare publishers this in 1999 with the regular Readers. And to that end, TEA misrepresented to the Board its redefinition of ESL decodability. Also, TEA power to appoint state textbook review panels makes them TEA clones instead of checks and balances. This train of abuse begs the question, **Why does TEA repeatedly try to help publishers instead of students?** Texas should revise its education code, to empower the SBOE to appoint state textbook review panel members.