READING ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

A Reading Skills Perspective for Teachers

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by

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To the Teacher

The following analysis is designed to acquaint the EFL teacher with the field of reading as it pertains to the foreign language teacher of English. It is in no way intended as a complete description of reading nor as a practical guide for direct classroom use; but rather to increase the EFL teacher's awareness of the complexity of reading as a word identification process and to serve as a catalyst in reshaping the approach to the teaching of reading in the EFL classroom.

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I. LANGUAGE, THINKING, AND READING

Reading is a complex activity dependent upon the thinking and language skills of the readers. Readers see print and identify it as a system of orthography. Familiarity with the distinctive features of the alphabet and language skills enable readers to identify words. The conceptual development of readers as well as their language skills provide the means for understanding the printed message. The figure below illustrates the input of concept development and language competency to reading.
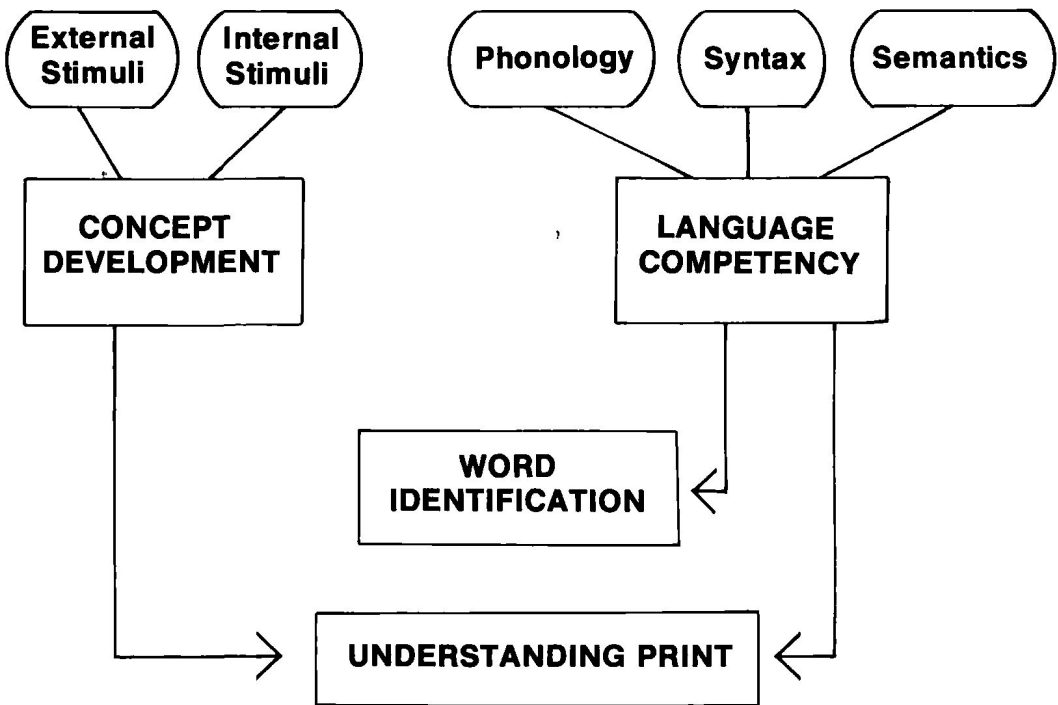
Understanding print is directly related to the readers' experience with the ideas expressed, and to the concepts that have been developed from these ideas.

Language is the symbolic system used to convey thought from one person to another. Language takes on a second set of symbols in writing to represent the oral language—thereby allowing a person's thoughts to be conveyed across time and space. Readers recognize orthography as symbols of language and words as symbols for thought. Reading, therefore, requires knowledge of both symbolic systems.

Skilled reading is an anticipatory activity; the readers look at print with an expectancy of receiving certain information. Using the fewest possi-

ble cues—grapho/phonological, syntactic, and semantic—the readers confirm or reject a hypothesis. If the hypothesis is rejected on the basis of the cues processed, the readers revise a guess and confirm its accuracy. The knowledge of phonological, syntactic, and semantic constraints allows the readers to rely on this hypothesis-testing activity. Without it the readers have to resort to mere word identification, hampering the ability to obtain meaning directly from print.

Conceptual development, experiential background, and language competency are factors that limit the EFL students trying to acquire adequate reading skills. Many materials are culturally oriented to the American way of thinking; this creates difficulties in arriving at the accurate meaning. The EFL readers' reactions to the printed matter are based on concepts derived from social, geographic, economic, and linguistic experiences which are very different from the writer's concepts. Wrong meanings or shades of meanings may be assigned to the passage, resulting in distorted understanding or none at all.

Reading a foreign language, therefore, requires the readers to have adequate language competence and experience. The readers anticipate what is written and check guesses through the application of phonological, syntactic, and semantic rules.

II. PREREQUISITES FOR READING

Reading requires a concept of print, a knowledge of the graphic system and the ability to focus and move the eyes according to the direction of the orthography.

CONCEPT OF PRINT

Prior to learning to read, a student must be aware that printed material conveys thoughts through words which are at least similar, if not identical to oral speech. EFL students may have varying degrees of familiarity with this concept. Many students illiterate in both languages will still have an idea of print through their general life experience. Students literate in their native language have had sufficient experience with this concept, providing the writing system is alphabetic in nature. Others who read a language recorded in ideographic characters may have to be initiated to an alphabetic form of writing. It is also possible for students familiar with a different alphabetic script to have a different orientation to print; some initiation to the Roman script system may be necessary.

KNOWLEDGE OF THE GRAPHIC SYSTEM

The ability to name the letters of the alphabet is not required for initial reading instruction. Because the names do not very often relate to the sounds represented, memorizing their names prior to learning to read them in meaningful word groupings may prove to be a hindrance. It is necessary, however, for students to be able to recognize that a graphic symbol is or is not a letter of the alphabet, and to know the distinctive features of each letter. As students begin to gain reading skill, the letters of the alphabet and their names will become part of their knowledge, either incidentally or through planned instruction if necessary.

EYE-FOCUS AND MOVEMENT

Learning to read English requires students to be able to focus their eyes on fine print and move them from left to right. As reading ability increases, the left to right movement gradually gives way to a movement from top to bottom with the readers using peripheral vision. EFL students, depending upon the direction of the orthography of their native language and their degree of literacy in it, may need some eye training.

III. INFLUENCES ON STUDENTS' ABILITY TO LEARN ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

There are certain considerations which appear to influence the readers' ability to learn English: aptitude, age, motivation, and native-language interference.

Aptitude. It is not precisely known what governs aptitude to learn a second language. Having mathematical ability or possessing a musical "ear" have been proposed as possible connections to a person's inherent ability to learn a second language. Some people believe that the students' ability to learn a second language in the classroom is somehow related to the amount of formal training received in the native language. The higher the level of formal education students have achieved in the native language, the greater is the ability to conceptualize in a second language such as English. Factors such as knowledge of tense markers, word forms, and parts of speech in the native language contribute towards the students' aptitude for learning EFL.

Age. Adults generally have a greater long-term memorizing facility than children, which gives them a greater advantage for foreign language learning. This long-term memorizing ability aids in the repetition and response of sounds, symbols, and words. It also provides an organization of newly acquired language structures, enabling the students to have greater recall and understanding.

However, age can also be detrimental. Psychological and physiological factors of age affect foreign language acquisition. Speech is governed by the left hemisphere of the brain, which controls all motor activity. After the age of puberty, it is more difficult to acquire new motor skills such as articulation, because the left hemisphere of the brain somehow loses its resilience. This has a definite effect on language learning.

Inhibition may also hinder foreign language learning. Unlike children, adults are more self-conscious and, therefore, hesitate for fear of making mistakes while learning a new language.

Motivation. Foreign language learning can be greatly influenced by motivation. Students may be motivated by financial as well as psychological needs to communicate effectively in English. They may learn English for job advancement; without a better knowledge of English, it may be difficult for them to obtain higher paying and more satisfying jobs.

The type of EFL communication skills taught in the EFL class may also have an effect on the students' motivation. If listening and speaking are considered more important skills to be learned, the students may lack the desire to read or write. Conversely, if the students want to learn reading or writing, they may resent having to learn how to speak, thus decreasing their motivation to learn English.

Native-language interference. When learning another language, students encounter certain pronunciation and structural difficulties because of their native language. This has an effect on their ability to acquire English, since the students may attempt to transfer or translate structure and vocabulary from their native language and consequently make errors in English. Native-language interference can be anticipated in language learning, but not all student errors can be attributed to this interference. Errors may also result from the inherent linguistic complexities of English.

IV. EFL STUDENTS AND READING

Several factors affect the students' ability to learn to read English as a foreign language. These include: oral knowledge of English, literacy level in the native language, the script of the native language, and the students' incentive.

Oral knowledge of English. The ability to read EFL presupposes a knowledge of linguistic structures and vocabulary. Without a knowledge of the sound patterns of English, it is difficult to decode; without a knowledge of the structural elements and vocabulary, it is impossible to comprehend. The most important element in teaching reading to EFL students is a knowledge of the spoken language. For the non-English speaking students, an oral knowledge of English phonology, grammar, and vocabulary is the most efficient basis for the teaching of reading. Relevant and effective reading instruction requires the teacher to utilize the students' knowledge of the aural/oral skills.

Literacy level in the native language. Students who are illiterate— unable to read or write—in the native language will have a more difficult task of reading English. It will be necessary to introduce them to the concept of print before beginning any reading instruction.

Functionally illiterate students, possessing no more than basic word recognition skills and limited comprehension ability in the native language, will have a greater advantage than totally illiterate students who are reading English. Although generally unable to depend on print as the means of carrying out everyday communication needs, these students have at least been introduced to the concept of reading.

Literate students, able to read in their native language, should find it easier to read English once they have begun to learn linguistic structure and vocabulary of English through the aural/oral skills. Literate students have the ability to decode and encode at a more sophisticated level, facilitating the transfer of these skills more quickly to the reading of English.

The native language script. A third element influencing the ability to read EFL is the similarity or difference of the native language script vis-à-vis the Roman alphabet. Learners whose script is completely unlike the roman script may have difficulty learning English symbols. Adjusting to left-to-right eye movement is a consideration if the students' native script is right-to-left (e.g., Arabic) or top-to-bottom (e.g., Chinese). The native script may also contain ideographs (symbols representing ideas),
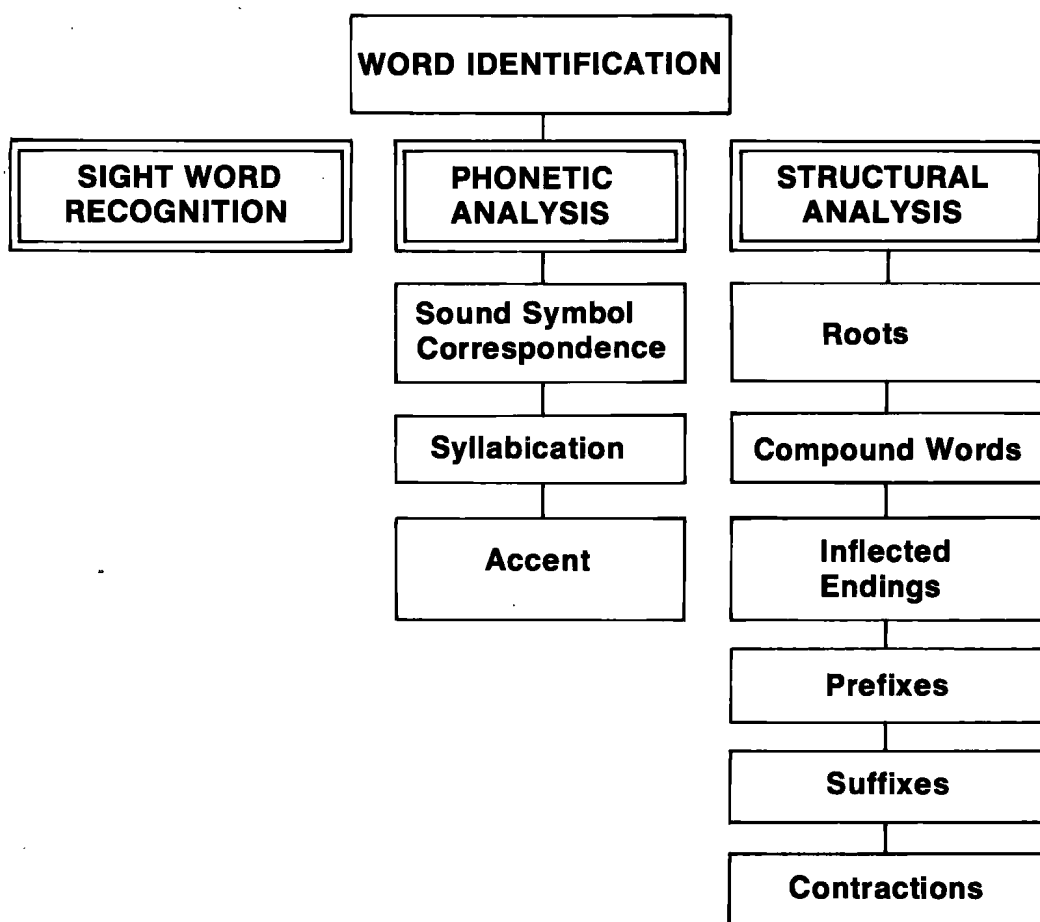
which differ from English graphemes. If the script is similar to English (e.g., the romance languages), then the students may have problems in transferring phonemes whose combinations differ in their native language and in English.

Incentive. Do the EFL students consider reading an important skill to acquire? Resentment toward the "relearning" of reading in a foreign language may have an effect on the students', desire to learn. The teacher's responsibility is to convince the students of the importance of reading by showing how it can strengthen and reinforce the other language skills, help advance career goals, or create an interest in literature.

V. WORD IDENTIFICATION

Before discussing the various strategies readers use to identify individual words, it should be stated that skilled readers spend very little time focusing on single words; and readers extract from the page the least amount of information to get the meaning. However, there are times when a word or words unfamiliar to readers must be identified in order to grasp the message the author is conveying. In these instances skilled readers are like beginning readers who need to "attack" each new word to get meaning.

Students just learning to read, as well as occasionally skilled readers, require strategies for reading unknown words and making these words part of their reading vocabulary. One strategy is the continuous development of sight word recognition. Another strategy focuses on the sound/symbol correspondence (phonetic analysis), and a third focuses on the morphological units (structural analysis), which allows a "break down" of a word in order to identify it in terms of its parts. Once the word is identified according to its morphological components, the contexts provide the basis for checking the correctness of the identification. The following figure illustrates the strategies the readers may use to identify an unfamiliar word.

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                    ┌─────────────────────────┐
                    │  WORD IDENTIFICATION    │
                    └─────────────────────────┘
         ┌──────────────────┼──────────────────┐
┌──────────────────┐ ┌──────────────────┐ ┌──────────────────┐
│  SIGHT WORD      │ │  PHONETIC        │ │  STRUCTURAL      │
│  RECOGNITION     │ │  ANALYSIS        │ │  ANALYSIS        │
└──────────────────┘ └──────────────────┘ └──────────────────┘
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	PHONETIC ANALYSIS	STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS
	Sound Symbol Correspondence	Roots
	Syllabication	Compound Words
	Accent	Inflected Endings
		Prefixes
		Suffixes
		Contractions

Sight Word Recognition

Sight Word Recognition refers to the immediate identification of a whole word by the readers. The readers use the configuration of the word rather than generalizations about the sounds which are represented by the letters. Sight words fall into two categories: those which are used so frequently that their recognition comes from habit and those which do not adhere to any phonic generalizations and are therefore identified as whole words. Skilled readers acquire a sight vocabulary of thousands of words. This vocabulary is the starting point for learning to read; instruction in other skills should be based on sight words already known. Development of a sight vocabulary is an ongoing process that continues throughout the readers' life.

EFL students who have less than native-speaker ability to analyze phonetic and grammatical structure need a large sight vocabulary, since their limited vocabulary may hinder an efficient application of phonetic and structural analysis. Words selected for reading instruction should be taken from the students' oral vocabulary.

Phonetic Analysis

Phonetic analysis refers to the ability to recognize sound/symbol relationships in order to identify a word. This involves a knowledge of the phonological patterns of the language, knowledge of the letters and their corresponding sounds in the particular word environment, the ability to identify such sound/symbol relationships while doing "real" reading, and the application of generalizations in situations calling for them.

By using phonetic analysis, readers are able to blend the individual sounds in the given order and thus to identify words they cannot recognize instantly as sight words. Along with other identification strategies, phonetic analysis is a necessary means to identify unknown words. Because of the nature of the English language and its orthography, readers should not become dependent on phonetic analysis as the sole means to this end; such dependency can produce serious problems.

If teaching phonetic analysis, the teacher should approach it systematically, emphasizing only those phoneme/grapheme correspondences the students cannot identify on their own. EFL students should be made aware of these correspondences through contrastive analysis of problem sounds in the native language and in English. The teacher should have a good working knowledge of phonics.

The English language contains 44 sounds or phonemes that can be spelled in 2,501 ways employing 26 letters. Each of these 26 letters is used to represent one or more than one phoneme, sometimes combining to represent sounds that have no letters in the alphabet, and sometimes, in the case of silent letters, to represent no phoneme at all. Very often there are clues to identify the particular phoneme represented; a discussion of these clues is the purpose of the following section.

Consonants

The English alphabet may be divided into two categories: letters that represent consonants and letters that represent vowels. It should be noted here that the letters w and y sometimes represent consonants and sometimes vowels. However, for the purpose of this section w and y will be considered as consonants.

The consonant letters are: b, c, d, f, g, h, j, k, l, m, n, p, q, r, s, t, v, w, x, y, and z. The chart below illustrates some of the sounds these letters represent.

Letter	Sounds	Examples
b	/b/	bad
	silent	lamb
c	/s/	cent
	/k/	cake
d	/d/	door
f	/f/	far
g	/g/	girl
	/j/	generous
	silent	gnat
h	/h/	him
	silent	hour
j	/j/	jeans
k	/k/	keep
	silent	knight
l	/l/	light
	silent	folk
m	/m/	me
n	/n/	now
	silent	column
p	/p/	people
	silent	psalm
q	/qw/	queen
r	/r/	ring
s	/s/	sing
	/z/	arms
t	/t/	time
	silent	listen
v	/v/	veil
w	/w/	wing
	silent	mow
x	/z/	xylophone
	/gz/	extra
	/ks/	extreme
y	/y/	yes
z	/z/	zebra

Before proceeding to discuss generalizations about the single-consonant letters, it is necessary to distinguish between *voiced* and *voiceless* consonants.

Voiced consonants are made with the vocal chords closed and vibrating and are the /d/, /z/, /g/, /v/, /b/.

Voiceless consonants originate in the mouth where there is no vibration of the vocal chords and are the /t/, /s/, /k/, /p/.

Generalizations about the consonant letters and their represented sounds can be stated as follows:

b. The letter *b* usually represents the initial sound heard in the word *bad;* however, when preceded by the letter *m* in the same syllable, it is usually silent, as in the word *lamb.*

c. The letter *c* represents two sounds: the soft sound associated with the letter *s* when it is followed by *i, e, and y, as in the word cent;* and the hard sound associated with the letter *k* when followed by *a, o,* and *u,* as in the word *cake.*

d. The letter *d* represents the initial sound heard in the word *door,* except when a consonant preceding it in the same syllable is voiceless. In this case the letter *d* represents the sound associated with the letter *t* as in the word *watched.*

f. The letter *f* always represents the initial sound heard in the word *fear* and the final sound heard in the word *of.*

g. The letter *g* represents the soft sound associated with the letter *j* when followed by *i, e,* or *y,* as in the word *generous;* and the hard sound when followed by any other letter, as in the word *girl;* or when *g* is the final letter in the syllable as in the word *long.* The letter *g* can also be silent when followed by the letter *n* as in the world *gnat.*

h. The letter *h,* usually represents the initial sound heard in the word *he.* It may, however, be silent in the initial syllable if the word is of French origin, as in the word *honest.* It may also be silent when followed by *g, k,* or *r* at the beginning of a word (*ghost, khaki, rhyme*).

j. The letter *j* represents the initial sound heard in the word *joke.*

k. The letter *k* usually represents the initial sound heard in the word

kitchen. However, when it is the initial sound in a word followed by the letter *n,* it is silent as in the word *knight.*

l. The letter *l* usually represents the initial sound heard in the word *like.* It is sometimes silent when it is followed by a consonant in the same syllable, as in the word *folk.*

m. The letter *m* represents the initial sound heard in the word *me.*

n. The letter *n* represents the initial sound heard in the word *near,* unless it follows *m* in a syllable, as in *column.* Then it is silent.

p. The letter *p* usually represents the initial sound heard in the word *poor.* It is sometimes silent as in the initial letter followed by *s (psychology)* and by the letter *n (pneumonia).*

r. The letter *r* represents the initial sound heard in the word *red.*

s. The letter *s* often represents the initial sound heard in the word *seem.* When the letter *s* is preceded by a consonant sound which is not voiceless in the same syllable, it represents the sound associated with the letter *z (arms).*

t. The letter *t* usually represents the sound associated with the initial sound in the word *term.* It is sometimes silent when it precedes *ch* in a syllable *(watch)* or follows *s (listen).*

v. The letter *v* represents the sound associated with the initial sound in the word *veil.*

x. The letter *x* may represent three sounds. If it is the initial letter in a word, it represents the sound associated with the letter *(xylophone).* If preceded by a vowel or the letter *h,* the letter *x* represents the sound associated by the letters *gz* as in the word *extra;* or *ks* as in the word *extreme.*

y. The letter *y* represents the initial sound in the word *year.*

z. The letter *z* represents the initial sound in the word *zebra.*

In addition to single-consonant letters, consonants sometimes occur in combinations. These combinations fall into two categories: *diagraphs* and *blends.* A *diagraph* represents a sound different from either of the two letters. Examples are *ch, ph, th, sh, gh.* A *blend* is a combination in

which the sounds of each of the letters is maintained, but they are said blended together. Examples are: *bl, br, cl, cr, dr, dw, fl, fr, gl, gr, pl, pr, sc, sk, sl, sm, sn, sp, st, sw, tr, tw, scr, str.*

Vowels

The vowel letters are *a, e, i, o,* and *u.* Each vowel letter often represents a long and a short sound:

Long:	ā	<u>a</u>te
Short:	a	<u>a</u>t
Long:	ē	<u>e</u>ven
. Short:	e	l<u>e</u>t
Long:	ī	m<u>i</u>ne
Short:	i	r<u>i</u>p
Long:	ō	<u>o</u>nly
Short:	o	l<u>o</u>t
Long:	ū	<u>u</u>se
Short:	u	c<u>u</u>p

Readers can identify a long or short vowel by examining the position of the vowel in relationship to consonants and other vowels in the same syllable. The conditions which usually determine whether a vowel sound is long or not are as follows:

1. When a vowel letter comes at the end of a syllable, it is usually long. Examples: *me go*

2. When there are two vowel letters in a syllable and one is a final *e* letter, the first vowel determines the vowel sound, which is long. The final vowel is silent. Examples: *ate, eve, ice, ode, use.*

3. When the letter *i* is the only vowel and is followed by *ld, nd,* or *gh* in a syllable, it is usually long. Examples: *mild, grind, light.*

4. When the letter *o* is the only vowel and followed by *ld* in a syllable, it is usually long. Examples: *cold, hold.*

5. When *e* is the final vowel letter preceded by *nc, dg, ns,* it usually re-

sults in a short vowel sound. Examples: *lance, ledge, rinse.*

Y as a Vowel

The letter *y* which sometimes acts like a consonant, may also act as a vowel under the following conditions:

1. When the letter *y* is the final vowel sound in a one-syllable word, it usually has the sound of the long letter *i*. Examples: *my, cry, fly.*

2. When the letter *y* is the final vowel sound in a word of more than one syllable, it usually has a sound close to the long letter *e*. Examples: *friendly, jittery, happy.*

Vowel-Consonant Combinations

The consonant letters *r, w,* and *l* affect the sound of a vowel when they follow the vowel in a syllable, as in the following examples:

1. When a vowel sound is followed by the letter *r* a blended sound (neither long nor short) may result. Examples: *car, inert, her, storm, fur.*

2. When a vowel sound is followed by the letter *r* and *e,* the blended sound may be longer and higher than the above. Examples: *care, here, fire, more, lure.*

3. When the letter *a* is followed by the consonant *l*, it represents a broad sound. Examples: *mall, tall, hall.*

4. When the vowel sounds *a, e,* and *o* are followed by the letter *w,* the sound is neither long nor short. Examples: *paw, new, cow.*

The consonant letters *d, t, c,* and *q* affect the sounds of certain vowels if they precede them in the following way:

1. When the letters *d* or *t* precede the letter *u* in a syllable, the resulting sound is palatalized. Examples: *education, future.*

2. When the letter *i* follows the letters *c, s,* or *t,* the resulting sound is the one usually associated with the diagraph *sh.* Examples: *glacial, fusion, faction.*

3. The letter *q* is always followed by the letter *u.* This combination