

# A Visionary's Look at Decoding and Spelling

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When John Arena designed the first version of the DSPT, then called the Diagnostic Spelling Potential Test (1982), he was responding to a controversy that was taking place in education at the time. Because of the inconsistent structure of English words, which have been richly drawn from several languages, many educators believed that the best way for students to master decoding and spelling was through rote memorization. Others, however, felt that because English does have many predictable spellings, learning the rules for those words would help students recognize and write many words correctly.

The test that John Arena developed did not take sides in the controversy. Instead, it took the more pragmatic—and scientific—approach of evaluating both sight recognition and phonetic decoding of words, by testing a variety of abilities related to decoding and spelling. This visionary's original assessment strategies have withstood the test of time, and the current version of the DSPT, renamed the Decoding and Spelling Proficiency Test–Revised (DSPT-R) is largely the same as the original, with changes to reflect contemporary word usage and updated norms.

Perhaps the most compelling aspect of the DSPT is that the examiner records the apparent manner in which students read words—either sight recognition or phonetic decoding—determined by response time. The manual for the current version of the test provides a table showing that an increasing percentage of words are recognized by sight as age increases.

The ideal, of course, is that readers should recognize many words by sight because this skill is closely associated with fluent reading and comprehension. It is important, however, to know if students are using an appropriate balance of sight recognition and phonetic decoding, so that instructional interventions can be tailored to their individual needs.

A second pioneering principle of the DSPT was John Arena's awareness that visual recognition of words is somewhat different from auditory-visual recognition. At first glance, it might seem that adding sensory information (auditory *and* visual vs. only visual) would enhance students' ability to recognize correctly spelled words. For some students, however, exactly the opposite occurs: The addition of auditory information makes it more difficult for some students to recognize correct spellings. This might have the subtle effect of causing students to read with *less* fluency—and probably comprehension—if they must process auditory input along with the visual. Since a classroom inevitably has ambient noise, these students may find it more difficult to learn under those conditions.

The current version of the DSPT is a powerful assessment tool that helps educators, psychologists, speech and language professionals, and others measure critical literacy skills. What is remarkable about this assessment is that John Arena's ideas were far ahead of his time. As the revision author of the DSPT, I am very proud to continue the legacy of a friend who did so much for exceptional learners, their families, and the professionals who serve them.

*About the author:*

Michael Milone is a research psychologist and co-author of the Decoding and Spelling Proficiency Test–Revised (2010).