

Reconceptualizing Sight Words: Building an Early Reading Vocabulary

Amanda Rawlins, Marcia Invernizzi

Early elementary students need to build a large bank of known words to become readers, but how do students learn words, and how can teachers choose activities to promote this learning?

During the literacy block, Mrs. Hunter (all names are pseudonyms) assigns her kindergartners to literacy stations. One group builds stamina by pretend-reading picture books, using the illustrations as a guide. Another group writes in journals using pictures, labels, and simple phrases. A third group meets with Mrs. Hunter to practice reading words and simple stories. Mrs. Hunter, following her district's pacing guide, also teaches high-frequency words every day so her students meet the district goal of 100 words by first grade.

Mrs. Hunter gathers a small group around her table. She shows the word *come* as the students copy the word on whiteboards. "Boys and girls, this is the word *come*. C-o-m-e, *come*. Say it with me." The students practice saying and writing the word, and then move on to *like*. "Boys and girls, this is the word *like*. L-i-k-e, *like*. Say it with me." The students practice saying and writing the word, and then move on to *all*. This pattern continues until Mrs. Hunter has taught three to five words each day, as there is no other way to make it to 100 by the end of the year and have time to review. After practicing each word, she shows the cards to the students and asks, "What's this word?" Many rounds of drill and review lead to some students offering the correct words, so Mrs. Hunter decides to move on to another activity.

Over the next days, Mrs. Hunter teaches three new words: *little*, *have*, and *did*. To reinforce previous learning, Mrs. Hunter also reviews the words *come*, *like*, and *all*. Again, some students can remember a handful of these words, but after several weeks, most students have forgotten them. Mrs. Hunter, distraught, keeps thinking, *I just taught this word yesterday! You have seen this word at least 20 times this week!*

What else can she do to make the words stick? How will she ensure that her students know 100

sight words by the end of the year? With the pacing guide looming, she perseveres, but the dialogue does not go well:

Mrs. Hunter: Let's go over our words. [She holds up a piece of sentence strip with the word *see* on it.] I see you. I see the calendar. I see Conner's red shirt. I see Ivan's shoes. *See*. It is spelled s-e-e. Let's say this word together.

Class: See, s-e-e.

Mrs. Hunter: This is something you do with your eyes.

Conner: I have a C in my name!

What went wrong? Kindergarten students, who are most often emerging or beginning readers, can learn to read simple words such as those Mrs. Hunter targeted. Immediate identification of high-frequency words, or words that occur most often in early texts, can assist students in moving through texts with enough ease to construct meaning. However, emphasizing only high-frequency words does not fully address how beginning readers build their store of written word knowledge, work toward fluency, and access meaning. Automatic word reading, or sight word reading, gives students the gas in the tank to propel the reading machine forward.

Amanda Rawlins is a doctoral student at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, USA; email arr2fj@virginia.edu.

Marcia Invernizzi is the Edmund H. Henderson Professor Emerita of Education at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, USA; email mai@virginia.edu.

We offer five assertions about sight word learning applicable to all early readers that can ameliorate the problem seen in our opening vignette:

1. The term *sight words* does not mean these words are learned solely by sight.
2. Words are easier to learn when they are concrete, high-imagery nouns, adjectives, or action verbs.
3. Words chosen for sight word learning must include more than high-frequency words; they should be purposefully chosen from the texts students are reading.
4. Words stick in memory through careful mapping of pronunciations to meaning through spelling.
5. Sight word learning requires a range of instructional activities depending on the student's level of word knowledge.

The Term *Sight Words* Does Not Mean These Words Are Learned Solely by Sight

Researchers have demonstrated that students who do not know the difference among letters, syllables, and words in print have difficulty matching spoken words to written words in context and, consequently, have difficulty remembering them out of context (Flanigan, 2007; Mesmer & Lake, 2010; Morris, Bloodgood, Lomax, & Perney, 2003). Remembering words out of context is necessary to acquire an early automatic reading vocabulary, or sight word vocabulary: words whose pronunciation and meaning students immediately access from memory without having to sound them out (Ehri, 2005). Ehri (2005) called the term *sight word* inaccurate because it implies that words are *only* learned by sight. Instead, Ehri's research suggested that words become sight words after repeated opportunities to engage in the process of recoding letters into sounds and attaching a meaning to the combined sounds (Metsala & Ehri, 2008). As students become more adept at recoding letter-sound correspondences, they gradually come to depend less on the process of translating letters into sounds to retrieve the pronunciations and meanings of printed words and more on the sponta-

neous recognition of words that are already stored in memory (i.e., sight words; Ehri, 2014). Once a word is in memory and stabilized through repeated exposure, the mere sight of the word's spelling immediately activates its pronunciation and meaning.

In this article, we reconceptualize the term *sight word* to encompass the idea of building an early reading vocabulary, a bank or store of automatically known words, where simply the sight of the word's spelling provides immediate access to its pronunciation and meaning. By reconceptualizing the term *sight words* to encompass building an early reading vocabulary, we might broaden our fixation on high-

frequency word lists and refocus our attention on the corpus of words to which we are exposing students in reading, writing, and phonics instruction. Such a corpus of words will include, but not be limited to, high-frequency words such as those that appear on the Dolch list (Dolch, 1936) or the Fry Instant Word List (Fry, 1980). With so many words to learn, which words should teachers choose first for an early reading vocabulary?

Words More Easily Become Sight Words When They Are Concrete, High-Imagery Nouns, Adjectives, or Action Verbs

Not all words within the corpus of early reading texts are easy to learn because they do not have equal semantic richness. Put another way, some words are more concrete, carry more meaning, and provide richer imagery than others. Students learn concrete, high-imagery and high-meaning nouns, adjectives, and action verbs more readily than articles and prepositions (Ehri & Roberts, 1979; Miles & Ehri, 2017; Vellutino, Scanlon, & Spearing, 1995). Table 1 gives some examples.

Consider this early text example: "I ran to the store to buy red apples." Although commonly prioritized for instruction, *I*, *to*, and *the* are more abstract and difficult to picture in a consistent physical form. However, the remaining words (*ran*, *store*, *buy*, *red*, and *apples*) are more concrete, making a mental

PAUSE AND PONDER

- Is it even possible for young students to remember written words before they know the difference between words and letters?
- Should all kindergartners learn the same words?
- What are the best ways to facilitate a match between early development and early word learning?

Table 1
Examples of Concrete and Abstract Nouns, Action Verbs, and Adjectives

Word type	Nouns	Action verbs	Adjectives
Concrete	<i>cat, coat, food</i>	<i>run, hop, ran, sit, jump, sleep, walk, play</i>	<i>little, white, happy, fat</i>
Abstract	<i>hope, love, fear</i>	<i>use, think, work, try, seem, gave, bring, should</i>	<i>some, odd, able</i>

image easier to produce and remember. Further, the pronoun (*I*), preposition (*to*), and article (*the*) do not provide insight as to the meaning of the sentence. It is the remaining words—the nouns, adjectives, and action verbs—that hold the meaning of the sentence.

Focusing solely on articles and prepositions as candidates for an early reading vocabulary will not give a student the complete meaning of early texts. Therefore, emphasizing concrete, high-imagery nouns, adjectives, and action verbs ensures access to the meanings of texts and increases the odds that these words will be remembered.

Words Chosen for Sight Word Learning Should Be Purposefully Chosen From the Texts Students Are Reading

Words that comprise an early reading vocabulary will vary according to the texts students are exposed to, their oral vocabulary, and their alphabetic and phonics instruction and learning. Whereas high-frequency word lists can offer valuable information about words' rank frequency of occurrence in early texts, these words are heavily skewed toward prepositions, articles, pronouns, and other words that function to glue the more meaningful words together. For this reason, linguists often refer to high-frequency words as function words because their primary role is syntactic. In the sentence "He went to the barn to get some eggs," the function words are *he*, *went*, *to*, and *the*. Where the person went and why he went there are explained by the words *barn* and *eggs*, often referred to as content words. Researchers have shown that content words, which are mostly nouns, adjectives, and action verbs, are easier to learn and remember than function words (Miles & Ehri, 2017).

In contrast to relying on high-frequency word lists that contain mostly function words, candidate words for an early reading vocabulary can be harvested from familiar texts. Familiar texts

might include memorable poems, simple texts, refrains from read-alouds, or the lyrics to songs or jingles read with the teacher. In this way, teaching these words has a larger purpose: to read and understand the words in a specific text, to transfer aspects of word knowledge to other words that contain the same graphophonemic features (i.e., letter-sound features) in other texts, and to use those graphophonemic features in writing. Instructional approaches detailed by Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton, and Johnston (2016), Johnston, Invernizzi, Juel, and Lewis-Wagner (2009), Morris (2005), and Stauffer (1970) have all described procedures for harvesting familiar words out of context and then teaching graphophonemic skills with those words in isolation for the purpose of acquiring an automatic early reading vocabulary. Researchers have demonstrated that the meanings, spellings, and pronunciations of both high-frequency function words and content words are learned when harvested from familiar texts and later analyzed in isolation (Ehri & Roberts, 1979; Miles & Ehri, 2017).

In fact, very early readers rely on context to learn words. Consider early readers with beginning sound knowledge trying to read a new word in isolation. Without a familiar text to anchor their guesses, many kindergartners shown the word *pretty* in isolation will offer a random guess that starts with *p*. But if the word *jump* is chosen after reading a familiar story several times, students can successfully read *jump* by thinking of the meaning of the text, remembering the sequence of the text, and using beginning sound knowledge. With the line of text in their mind and the meaning made clear, students are primed for word learning. *Jump* can now be taken out of context and examined letter for letter.

However, Miles and Ehri (2017) cautioned against simply reading a word in context one time and reading the same word in isolation one time with the hopes of building an early reading vocabulary. It is the repeated exposure and analysis of the word in its contextual setting and its isolated setting that

allows connections to be made among meaning, pronunciation, and spelling. To ensure that these strong connections are made to solidify a word in an automatic vocabulary, words can be harvested from familiar contexts for isolated practice.

Words Stick Through Careful Attention to Meaning, Sound, and Spelling

Words stick when their meanings, pronunciations (sounds), and spellings are wedded, or amalgamated (Ehri, 2005). Once wedded, the mere sight of the word automatically activates its meaning, pronunciation, and spelling. The process of amalgamating a word's meaning, pronunciation, and spelling is called graphophonemic analysis, where the letters and sounds bind to word meanings and pronunciations after repeated practice in and out of context (Metsala & Ehri, 2008). Practice in isolation is necessary but not sufficient for graphophonemic analysis; the same is true for practice in context. In fact, researchers have shown that the benefits of contextual practice are different from those of isolated practice. Miles and Ehri (2018) found that kindergartners learned word meanings better with practice in context and learned letter-sound associations better with practice in isolation. Therefore, to unite the meaning, pronunciation, and spelling of a word,

both contextual and isolated practice are necessary. Detailed in the following sections and summarized in Table 2, each aspect of word learning (i.e., meaning, pronunciation, spelling) work together to ensure that words stick.

Meaning

The ultimate goal of reading hinges on the construction of meaning. Without understanding the printed words, readers cannot move through sentence- or discourse-level texts. Unfortunately, knowing every letter-sound match will not assist readers unless they also use meaning to confirm that the decoding attempt was correct. In other words, every decoding attempt will result in a nonsense word until a pronunciation is close enough to recognize a meaningful word (Tunmer & Chapman, 2012). All teachers have seen this phenomenon: An early reader will diligently decode a seemingly unknown word, such as /f/-/i/-/j/ (i.e., /f/-/i/-/sh/), and, as if a light is turned on, joyfully announce, "Fish! The word is fish!" Only when readers wed the letter-sound matches with a familiar meaning do they stand a chance at building an early reading vocabulary.

To practice these letter-sound matches, many educators turn to pseudowords, or words that are spelled like real words but are not real words (e.g., *zoop*). However, choosing pseudowords prevents early readers from using meaning during word

Table 2
Summary of How Sight Words Stick

Aspect of word knowledge	How do sight words stick?
Meaning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Students learn words that come from their reading. ■ Students learn concrete, high-imagery, high-meaning nouns, adjectives, and action verbs more readily than articles and prepositions. ■ Students learn words when meanings are wedded to pronunciations through letter sounds and spellings.
Pronunciations (sounds)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Students must confront the mismatch of sound and meaning units in syllable analysis (e.g., <i>butterfly</i>, <i>bear</i>). ■ Students must turn their attention to beginning sound analysis. ■ Students must later analyze the rest of the word (beginning, middle, end).
Spelling	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Students can pronounce words while spelling and looking at them to wed the sound, spelling, and meaning. ■ Students can use the spellings of words through writing to help words stick in memory even if the spellings are only partially correct (e.g., "coch" for <i>coach</i>). ■ Students can analyze the graphophonemic properties of <i>all</i> words along the continuum of high-frequency regularity. ■ Students can group words into friends and enemies and compare and contrast their sound-spelling correspondences.

reading attempts. Educators can encourage early readers to analyze letter-sound correspondences, but final confirmation of the letter-sound matching attempts should come through identification of a real, familiar word. Robbing early readers of meaning by using pseudowords to build an early reading vocabulary could suggest that letter-sound matching is not related to construction of meaning during text reading. To support early readers' graphophonemic analysis, words that have meaning, or real words, will facilitate stronger connections among the meaning, pronunciation, and spelling needed to push the word into an automatic sight word vocabulary.

Pronunciation

In addition to understanding the meaning of words, during graphophonemic analysis students must simultaneously attend to the speech sounds within a pronounced word. What can teachers do to prepare kindergartners for graphophonemic analysis? We offer three forms of early graphophonemic analysis that lay the foundation for words to stick: confronting the mismatch of syllables and words, attending to beginning sounds, and, later, analyzing the rest of the word. We focus on these three forms of analysis because they are prerequisites for future phonics, decoding, and spelling instruction (Flanigan, 2007; Mesmer & Lake, 2010; Morris et al., 2003; Scanlon, Anderson, & Sweeney, 2017).

Confronting the mismatch of sound and meaning through syllable awareness comes first and relates to phonological awareness instruction, or instruction focused on becoming aware of and manipulating the sounds in speech (Scanlon et al., 2017). Consider the printed words *bear* and *butterfly*. Students describe the semantic, or meaning, properties of *bear* as big, fat, or large. Yet, interestingly, the syllable analysis of *bear* is the opposite: *bear* has only one syllable and four letters. In contrast, the longer word *butterfly*, which students might think of semantically as tiny, small, or skinny, has three syllables and nine letters. *Bear* looks and sounds like a small, short word compared with *butterfly*, although their meanings are the opposite. Students must reconcile this disconnect to improve the accuracy of their fingerpoint reading in familiar texts (Invernizzi, 2017; Mesmer & Lake, 2010). For example, students pointing to the line "The caterpillar was hungry" need to hold their finger on the word *caterpillar* throughout the pronunciation of all four

syllables before moving to the next word. Syllable awareness facilitates the ability to fingerpoint to words in familiar texts, which is necessary to build an early reading vocabulary.

Beginning sound awareness can also enhance the ability to accurately point and self-correct when reading words in and out of context (Scanlon et al., 2017). In the example "The caterpillar was hungry," students learn that they cannot touch the word *was* until they pronounce a /w/ sound. Without beginning sound awareness, students cannot distinguish *caterpillar* from *was* even in memorized texts and will be unsure of where new words begin. Beginning sounds provide an anchor for making accurate speech-to-print matches in students' early fingerpoint reading to memorized or familiar texts.

As students progress into early text reading, primary teachers see them apply their burgeoning beginning sound knowledge when attempting to read the word *ball*: "It's *bus*, no, *box*, no, *bag*." Students' attention to the beginning sound cannot go unnoticed, but analysis must move to the rest of the word for the early reader to distinguish *ball*, *bus*, *box*, and *bag*. As students acquire full phoneme awareness, or the ability to manipulate the smallest speech sounds, the graphophonemic analysis becomes more complete, especially as these phonemes are matched to letters (Ehri, 2005). Students can then attend to medial and final letters and sounds, which allow distinctions between visually similar words (e.g., *bug* vs. *big*). Once students can attend to the beginning, medial, and ending sounds of a word, they will rapidly build an early reading vocabulary with repeated exposure to words in and out of context.

Spelling

Meaning and sound analysis assists early readers as they build an early reading vocabulary, but without attention to spelling, the words will not stick in memory. Words are stored in our lexicons, or dictionaries in our heads, as a result of the wedding of pronunciation and meaning *through* spelling (Ehri, 2005; Metsala & Ehri, 2008). So, pronouncing words as they are written will improve students' ability to map the speech sounds to graphemes, or letters (Ehri, 2014; Ouellette, 2010). For early readers, the amalgamation of pronunciation, meaning, and spelling can begin even when students' spellings are only partially correct, as in spelling the word *coach* as "coh" or "coch."

Although concrete, high-imagery nouns, adjectives, and action verbs will stick more easily (Ehri

& Roberts, 1979; Vellutino et al., 1995), at some point teachers must address other high-frequency words such as *who*, *have*, and *some* that have some spelling irregularities. Often, high-frequency words are described as completely irregular words that must simply be remembered; however, high-frequency words lie along a continuum of irregularity (Miles, Rubin, & Gonzalez-Frey, 2018; Warley, Invernizzi, & Drake, 2015). The high-frequency words *ate*, *away*, and *three* follow conventional spelling patterns. The words *some*, *have*, and *said* have partial irregularity. The consonant sounds in *some*, *have*, and *said* are regular; it is only the vowels that have the irregular sound-spelling correspondence. The word *of* is a rare exception; neither sound in *of* follows regular sound-spelling correspondences.

As high-frequency words lie along a continuum of irregularity, with most following some regular sound-spelling correspondences, students can still use their graphophonemic skills to analyze high-frequency words (Duke & Mesmer, 2016; Mesmer, 2017). Students can produce the sounds in *have* as they spell the word and discuss the meaning from a familiar text. Even when spelling *was*, students can produce the sounds as they spell the word and reflect on the change in sound-spelling correspondences. With repeated exposure in and out of context, students will consolidate the sounds, the regularities and irregularities in spelling, and the meaning through contextual application.

Researchers also have suggested teaching high-frequency words in groups according to common spelling patterns (Bear et al., 2016; Duke & Mesmer, 2016; Mesmer, 2017). We suggest using the terms *friends* and *enemies* to group words by spelling patterns. Friends are words that look and sound alike and have similar spelling patterns (e.g., *no*, *go*, *so*); enemies are words that may sound alike but have different spellings (e.g., *no* and *toe*) or may have similar spellings but different sounds (e.g., *no*, *to*). To introduce these terms, we suggest explicit teaching of the word meanings, which would include flexible thinking to consider how enemies may also have their own group of friends. Traditionally, the word *look* may have been described as an irregular word that must be memorized. However, *look* has many friends in early texts: *book*, *took*, and *good*, among others; it also has enemies in the words *soon* and *moon*. Similarly, *out* has many friends in early texts: *our*, *about*, and *shout*, among others; it also has enemies in the words *you*, *could*, *would*, and *should*. Even

among the enemies, there is already another group of friends forming: *could*, *would*, and *should*.

Although applicable to high-frequency word learning, groups of friends and enemies can be built to include both high-frequency words and other words. For example, the words *boy* and *box* could be grouped as friends based on beginning sounds, or the words *big*, *dig*, and *wig* could be grouped as friends based on the *-ig* feature. Categorizing high-frequency words plus other words as friends and enemies during spelling analysis will give early readers repeated exposure to common spelling chunks and patterns.

It is not the case that students have to rely on rote visual memory alone to add high-frequency words as sight words. The high-frequency word continuum of irregularity allows students to apply graphophonemic analysis of meaning, pronunciation, and spelling to add high-frequency words as sight words and categorize them as friends and enemies, simplifying and organizing the learning process.

Sight Word Learning Requires a Range of Instructional Activities Depending on the Student's Level of Word Knowledge

For words to stick, teachers can plan instructional activities that reflect students' levels of word knowledge. Often, flashcards are used to build an early reading vocabulary of sight words. We argue that analyzing word cards from familiar texts is essential to making words stick. It is the rote drill of flashcards, not from a familiar text and without any sound-to-spelling analysis, that we find problematic. Isolated practice of words from familiar texts is essential for graphophonemic analysis. We recommend taking familiar words out of context, learning how to analyze them graphophonemically, and then finding other, similar words back in context to later analyze in isolation again.

Importantly, these activities vary depending on the student's level of word knowledge. Just like our opening student Conner with a C in his name, not every student has enough word knowledge to tackle *pretty* and may instead be working out the differences between letters and words. Therefore, we argue for teachers to help each student build a unique early reading vocabulary. Students spelling *bus* as "S5BLC" will be in different texts than those spelling *bus* as "bos," so the words harvested for their early reading vocabularies must be unique.

When choosing instructional activities for students to acquire an initial sight word vocabulary, we suggest assessing word knowledge through early spelling attempts. Young students' earliest spelling attempts progress along a developmental trajectory that can be matched to a continuum of appropriate instructional activities to build sight word knowledge (Bear et al., 2016). At each stage, activities build on the previous stage and push students into deeper analysis of words. Activities and descriptions of the stages will be described in detail in the next section and are summarized in Table 3.

Letter-Like Forms and Strings of Letters

Students who spell using letter-like forms or strings of letters (e.g., "S5BLC") need contextual practice with words. Some students may not yet know the difference among a letter, a word, and a sentence. Teachers can model fingerpoint reading to simple texts and have students echo and choral read the familiar texts. Students' pointing attempts will be imperfect, especially if the text contains multisyllabic words, so students at this point on the continuum can confront the mismatch of meaning and syllables (e.g., *butterfly* has three syllables but is the name of a small animal). Teachers can practice syllabification

Table 3
Summary of Instructional Activities to Build Sight Word Knowledge

Students' word knowledge	Instructional activities to build sight word knowledge
Letter-like forms in spelling attempts; strings of letters (e.g., "S5BLC")	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The teacher models fingerpoint reading to simple texts. ■ Students echo and choral read familiar texts while practicing fingerpoint reading. ■ Students learn letter names and sounds and find them in familiar texts. ■ Students practice clapping words from the texts into syllables and relate the length of the written word to the number of syllables.
Salient and beginning sounds in spelling attempts (e.g., <i>B</i> for <i>bus</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Students continue fingerpoint reading to familiar texts, emphasizing that each touch matches a beginning sound. ■ The teacher picks concrete, high-imagery words from familiar texts. ■ Students identify these words in familiar texts by rereading and using beginning sounds. ■ Students sort concrete, high-imagery words from the texts by their beginning sounds. ■ Students keep these words in individual plastic baggies for sorting by beginning sounds. ■ Students draw and label other words that begin with the same sounds as baggie words.
Beginning and ending sounds in spelling attempts (e.g., "bs" for <i>bus</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Students identify words in familiar texts using beginning and ending sounds. ■ Students negotiate two-syllable words using the beginning and ending sounds. ■ Students sort concrete, high-imagery decodable words by same-vowel rhyming families (e.g., <i>dig, pig</i> vs. <i>dip, hip</i>; <i>cat, hat</i> vs. <i>cap, tap</i>). ■ Students analyze high-frequency words and continue building friend and enemy groups. ■ Students use their baggie words to create and write sentences.
Beginning and ending sounds; salient representation of medial sound (e.g., "bos" or "bus" for <i>bus</i>)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Students self-correct pointing errors when reading familiar texts. ■ Students identify words from texts in isolation; some may need to refer back to the book. ■ Students use familiar and unfamiliar words in writing. ■ Students can play games to review known words that are now sight words.

and rhyme in and out of context orally with word play and read-alouds. As students learn the alphabet and some letter sounds, teachers can have students hunt for letters in familiar texts and add writing to their drawings. Although these students are in the earliest stages of sight word learning, this type of contextual practice builds a foundation for later isolated word practice (Invernizzi, 2017).

Salient and Beginning Sounds

Students who spell using salient and/or beginning sounds (e.g., B for bus) still need to master fingerpoint reading. But, armed with beginning sound knowledge, students can direct their pointing attempts to the beginning letters for each word, which improves pointing accuracy. At this point, teachers can choose concrete, high-imagery words from the texts for students to analyze in isolation and sort by beginning sounds. In addition, students can match these words back to familiar texts they are reading. Students can also keep individual plastic baggies of their words for practice in and out of context. As students' baggies grow, so does their word knowledge.

Beginning and Ending Sounds

Students who spell using beginning and ending sounds (e.g., "bs" for bus) can use knowledge of word boundaries to improve fingerpoint reading attempts. Armed with knowledge of how words look and sound at the beginning and end, students can identify more words in and out of context, can differentiate between *ball* and *bus*, and can sort decodable, high-imagery words by rhyming families (e.g., *pig*, *dig* vs. *rip*, *hip*). Students can also analyze high-frequency words in and out of context and continue building groups of friends and enemies (e.g., friends: *go*, *no*, *so*; enemy: *to*). As students practice fingerpoint reading, analyzing words in and out of context, and applying the sounds, meanings, and spellings through writing attempts, their individual baggies begin to swell with familiar words. However, deeper analysis is required for students to differentiate *rug* from *rag* or *went* from *want*.

Beginning and Ending Sounds With a Salient Representation of the Medial Sound

Students who mark their spellings with a salient medial vowel sound (e.g., "bos" or "bus" for bus) have made an important step in building an early reading vocabulary. They can now differentiate

words via the medial vowel, even if there are still features of words they cannot yet analyze (e.g., *help* may still be analyzed and written as "hep"). Students at this point on the word knowledge continuum self-correct their fingerpoint attempts and identify many words in and out of context. Isolated practice can deepen graphophonemic analysis skills by comparing and contrasting words by the medial vowel and even adding two consonants to the beginning and ends of words (e.g., *clip*, *must*). Now can students make many words stick as sight words that have their complete spellings, pronunciations, and meanings wedded in the mental dictionary.

Conclusion

In today's kindergarten classrooms, students can be asked to learn up to 100 sight words a year. Many teachers feel like Mrs. Hunter: "I just taught this word yesterday! You have seen this word at least 20 times this week!" For students to build an automatic early reading vocabulary, which we argue should not be targeted to or limited by 100 high-frequency words during the kindergarten year, teachers must keep these five assertions in mind:

TAKE ACTION!

Consider the following when building an early reading vocabulary with early readers:

1. Become comfortable articulating how early elementary students learn words.
2. Understand the terms *sight words* and *high-frequency words*. Know the similarities and differences.
3. Explore early texts you use in the classroom to identify words that may be best for building an early reading vocabulary.
4. Use a spelling sample to determine where students lie on the continuum of word knowledge (see the first column in Table 3).
5. Consider instructional activities that match students' word knowledge (see the second column in Table 3). Remember that the words chosen for building an early reading vocabulary should come from texts that students are reading.
6. Develop a partnership for practicing words and text reading with parents and caregivers outside the classroom (see the More to Explore sidebar for a resource on how to communicate word learning to parents).

1. The term *sight words* does not mean these words are learned solely by sight.
2. Words are easier to learn when they are concrete, high-imagery nouns, adjectives, or action verbs.
3. Words chosen for sight word learning must include more than high-frequency words; they should be purposefully chosen from the texts students are reading.
4. Words stick in memory through careful mapping of pronunciations to meaning through spelling.
5. Sight word learning requires a range of instructional activities depending on the student's level of word knowledge.

REFERENCES

- Bear, D.R., Invernizzi, M., Templeton, S., & Johnston, F. (2016). *Words their way: Word study for phonics, vocabulary, and spelling instruction* (6th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- Dolch, E.W. (1936). A basic sight vocabulary. *The Elementary School Journal*, 36(6), 456–460. <https://doi.org/10.1086/457353>
- Duke, N.K., & Mesmer, H.A.E. (2016, June 23). Teach “sight words” as you would other words [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://www.literacyworldwide.org/blog/literacy-daily/2016/06/23/teach-idquo-sight-words-rdquo-as-you-would-other-words>
- Ehri, L.C. (2005). Learning to read words: Theory, findings, and issues. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 9(2), 167–188. https://doi.org/10.1207/s1532799xssr0902_4
- Ehri, L.C. (2014). Orthographic mapping in the acquisition of sight word reading, spelling memory, and vocabulary learning. *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 18(1), 5–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888438.2013.819356>
- Ehri, L.C., & Roberts, K.T. (1979). Do beginners learn printed words better in contexts or in isolation? *Child Development*, 50(3), 675–685. <https://doi.org/10.2307/1128932>
- Flanigan, K. (2007). A concept of word in text: A pivotal event in early reading acquisition. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 39(1), 37–70. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10862960709336757>
- Fry, E. (1980). The new instant word list. *The Reading Teacher*, 34(3), 284–289.
- Invernizzi, M. (2017). The role of developmental word knowledge in achieving fluency. *Michigan Reading Journal*, 49, 48–52.
- Johnston, F.R., Invernizzi, M., Juel, C., & Lewis-Wagner, D. (2009). *Book buddies: A tutoring framework for struggling readers* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Guilford.
- Mesmer, H.A. (2017, November). Beginning text design word frequency or decodability? Testing the integration of two word features. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Literacy Research Association, Tampa, FL.
- Mesmer, H.A.E., & Lake, K. (2010). The role of syllable awareness and syllable-controlled text in the development of fingerpoint reading. *Reading Psychology*, 31(2), 176–201. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02702710902754341>
- Metsala, J.L., & Ehri, L.C. (Eds.). (2008). *Word recognition in beginning literacy*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Miles, K.P., & Ehri, L.C. (2017). Learning to read words on flashcards: Effects of sentence contexts and word class in native and nonnative English-speaking kindergartners. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 41(4), 103–113. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ecresq.2017.06.001>
- Miles, K.P., Rubin, G.B., & Gonzalez-Frey, S. (2018). Rethinking sight words. *The Reading Teacher*, 71(6), 715–726. <https://doi.org/10.1002/trtr.1658>
- Morris, D. (2005). *The Howard Street tutoring manual: Teaching at-risk readers in the primary grades* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Guilford.
- Morris, D., Bloodgood, J.W., Lomax, R.G., & Perney, J. (2003). Developmental steps in learning to read: A longitudinal study in kindergarten and first grade. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 38(3), 302–328. <https://doi.org/10.1598/RRQ.38.3.1>
- Ouellette, G. (2010). Orthographic learning in learning to spell: The role of semantics and type of practice. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 107(1), 50–58. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jecp.2010.04.009>
- Scanlon, D.M., Anderson, K.L., & Sweeney, J.M. (2017). *Early intervention for reading difficulties: The interactive strategies approach* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Guilford.
- Stauffer, R.G. (1970). *The Language-Experience Approach to the teaching of reading*. New York, NY: Harper & Row.
- Tunmer, W.E., & Chapman, J.W. (2012). Does set for variability mediate the influence of vocabulary knowledge on the development of word recognition skills? *Scientific Studies of Reading*, 16(2), 122–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10888438.2010.542527>
- Vellutino, F.R., Scanlon, D.M., & Spearing, D. (1995). Semantic and phonological coding in poor and normal readers. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology*, 59(1), 76–123. <https://doi.org/10.1006/jecp.1995.1004>
- Warley, H.P., Invernizzi, M.A., & Drake, E.A. (2015). Sight word learning: There's more to it than meets the eye. *Journal of the Virginia State Reading Association*, 37, 40–45.

MORE TO EXPLORE

- Invernizzi, M. (2014, October 9). Should we teach 100 sight words to kindergartners? [Web log post]. Retrieved from <https://www.literacyworldwide.org/blog/literacy-daily/2014/10/09/should-we-be-teaching-100-sight-words-to-kindergartners->
- Scanlon, D.M., Anderson, K.L., Morse, M.-J., & Yurkewecz, T. (2012). *Helping your child become a reader*. Albany: Child Research and Study Center, University at Albany, State University of New York. Retrieved from <https://www.albany.edu/crsc/parentbooklet.shtml>
- “Concept of Word (COW),” a PALS Quick Check for fingerpoint reading: https://pals.virginia.edu/pdfs/download/QC_COW.pdf
- “Syllable Games,” provided by Reading Rockets: http://www.readingrockets.org/strategies/syllable_games
- “Writing Poetry With Rebus and Rhyme,” a ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan by Devon Hamner that includes poems for fingerpointing practice and rhyming practice: <http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/writing-poetry-with-rebus-273.html>

Copyright of Reading Teacher is the property of Wiley-Blackwell and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.