Teaching a Basic Sight Word Vocabulary

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TEACHING A BASIC SIGHT
WORD VOCABULARY

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In diagnosing reading ability, the analysis should include an investigation of the subject's knowledge of basic words commonly familiar in most children's oral-aural vocabulary. Likewise, any beginning reading instruction program should include some help in learning commonly used words, since these compose a large part of the vocabulary of many reading series and other printed material.

In 1930, Edward Dolch examined three then-prominent word lists and from these compiled a list of 220 words, excluding nouns, which commonly occur in all reading material. These words were, in general, functional words which were abstract in meaning and this tended to make them somewhat difficult to learn.

In 1967, Henry Kucera and W. Nelson Francis published a new list of present day most commonly used words which agreed with the Dolch list in only the first eighty-two entries (5). Regardless of the source or list used, it does seem important that children develop a large sight word vocabulary in order to enhance reading fluency, speed, and comprehension. Most average students seem to master such a list by beginning third grade level, but this is often not true for children who experience reading disability. Therefore, teachers should have knowledge of a variety of devices and techniques for helping students learn a basic sight vocabulary, other than by repeated drill. It is also helpful to determine which of the basic words are most troublesome for most children.

The Garrard Publishing Company of Champaign, Illinois, publishes A Basic Sight Word Test, as well as many other games and reading materials related to a sight vocabulary as compiled by Dolch (4). These tests can be used for individual or group testing. The errors can be tallied and flash cards can be used for a number of activities and games to help teach these words. There are commercially produced boxes of these sight words, and cards can also be made from strips of cut tagboard. It is helpful if the teacher prints the word in pencil and allows the student to trace over the printing with a magic marker or crayon while he spells it aloud. This method is referred to as the VAKT method (1). The child should use his own cards and

file them as he learns them. This and other motivational techniques should be used to show the student he is making progress.

The commercially produced boxes of flash cards are divided into two sets, the easier and the more difficult words (4). They are also color cued with the easier ones printed in black and the more difficult ones in green. These cards are excellent for building up quick recognition of the words by total configuration. The words can be taught in sequence as they are introduced in the basic text being used for various reading groups. The same words can be part of a spelling word list.

The basic words should always be introduced in the context of a sentence. As the word is verbalized, the appropriate flash card should be held up for a visual-auditory relationship cue. If possible, a question should be asked which will necessitate the student's use of the selected word in his answer. As he says the word, he is handed the appropriate flash card so that he understands the association of the spoken word and the printed symbol for it.

Word games are a highly motivating method for helping children to learn the words in a basic sight vocabulary list. The following are some variations of old favorites which teachers may find useful for this purpose. It is sometimes helpful to share with parents ways for helping a child learn these important words through game play.

GAMES

Pick Up

Several words are laid face up on a table. The teacher calls out one of the words and the child selects it from among the detractors. This continues until all the words are gone.

Take Away

Words are laid face up on the table. The child reads all of them to himself. The teacher removes one of the words and the child tries to tell which one is missing. If he is correct, he keeps the word. Only a few words at a time are used.

Ladder Climb

A ladder can be made of construction paper. On each rung a flash card is laid face up. The child climbs the ladder by saying each word. If he misses one going up, the teacher tells him that word and he tries to recall it on the way down.

Post Office

The words are printed on the face of small envelopes. Trading stamps or other mock stamps may be placed in the upper right hand corner to enhance the resemblance to a real letter. The postman delivers letters to a receiver only if he can name the word on the letter front. Inserted in each envelope, a simple sentence using the basic words plus one of the common nouns can be printed on a small piece of paper. This represents the "letter" received. The receiver reads the letter to others in the game. Some letters can be directions such as: "Jump up and down."

Fish Pond

The words are printed on fish patterns cut from tagboard or construction paper. Each child is provided with a pole and a line to which a small magnet is attached. Each fish has a paper clip secured to it where the mouth is drawn. Skillets can be made from black construction paper. As the children fish, they can put their catches in their skillet only if they know the word.

Save-and-Learn Pack

Flash cards are exposed quickly around the group, giving each child his turn. If a child misses, a duplicate card is made for him to keep in his "save-pack." He works on these cards whenever he has an opportunity. Children can help each other learn their "save-packs." Then try to learn the words and get rid of their packs.

Ball Game

Children can be divided for teams by counting off "1"—"2." They then stand behind their chairs. Word cards are laid face up on each chair. The teacher then bounces a ball to each team member. If the child catches the ball, he also attempts to call out his word and score a "hit." If he knows the words, he picks up his card. If not, the card remains on the chair. At the end of the game, runs are counted for each team by collecting the cards picked up by children who knew them. Other cards are then placed on the chairs with those remaining that were not known the first inning.

Three-on-a-Match

Three identical packs of cards are needed. One child is a caller and calls out a word from his pack. He does not allow the other two

players to see the card. They try to see who can find the called word in each of their packs first. The one who does places the word face up on the table. The first to get rid of his pack is the winner and then becomes the caller.

Squat

The word cards are quickly flashed around the group, giving each child a turn to call out at his turn. If he misses, he must assume a squat position. He may rise only if he is quick enough to call out another word before the child whose turn it is can say it.

Conductor Game

One child acts as conductor of the train. He stands beside the seat of the first child in the group. The teacher flashes a card. If the child acting in the role of conductor can say the word first, he moves on to the next child and continues in the role of conductor. However, if the other child can say the word before the conductor, he then becomes the conductor.

Train Game

Students are divided into two groups, each group representing a train. Each child represents a train car and is given a flash card to hold. Each child, beginning with the engine, attempts to say his word correctly. If a child misses a word, he moves to the rear or the "caboose" car. Alternate turns are taken by each side. Naturally, the team missing the most words lengthens from the rear and is behind the other train. The game is continued until an arbitrary point of being behind is reached. The other train wins and sides can be re-chosen.

Passport Game

Each child is given a word card representing his passport to board a ship. The students show and say their word to board. When the captain calls their word later, they may get off the ship.

Word Hunt

Words are hidden (in plain sight) randomly about the room, while children close their eyes. At a signal, they begin to hunt for the words. However, they can keep them only if they can say the found words correctly. The ones having the most words are the winners.

See and Say

Words are lined up in a holder or chalkboard rail. A duplicate pack of words is held by the teacher. Students are divided into two teams. Alternate turns are taken as the teacher allows students to draw a card from her pack. One point is won if the player can correctly match his card with one on display. Another point is earned if he can correctly say the word he matches. The team with the most points wins the game.

Bingo

Groups of words can be arranged randomly on cards. Players are provided with some type of discs or covers for a recognized word on the cards. The teacher calls out words appearing on the cards. Players try to cover words in a row until all are covered either vertically or horizontally. This game can also be purchased commercially.

Race Track

A group of word cards are laid in the form of a race track on a table or on the floor. Each player is provided with a small race car. Children even like to make their own from construction paper. A starting place is marked. Small signs such as "bad curve" can be placed near difficult words. Each player moves his card along the side or over the words representing the track. If he misses one, he must make a pit stop for repairs. The next player then proceeds around the track. Consecutive turns are taken. A stop watch can be used if available to see which racer can go around the track in the least amount of time. Those out of the race for a pit stop have an opportunity to learn their word by listening as the racer after him says the word.

OTHER TECHNIQUES

In addition to many games that can be played to help students learn a basic vocabulary, the use of machines with programmed materials can be beneficial. At the present time, commercially prepared materials of tapes, records, and filmstrips are available and can be used by the student after basic instruction on machine operation. One example is a type of small record player which comes with unbreakable records and color cued cards which are numbered progressively. After completing the program, all of the basic words are known and used in simple stories which the child can then read. The student operates the machine independently and progresses at his own rate. He can repeat a plate or record until he has mastered it (5).

The basic words can also be typed in lists or on individual cards and then taped accordingly. As the student looks at the word, he attempts to say it correctly before the tape recorder which either reinforces his correctness or lets him know he is in error. If so, he lays the card aside, and learns it later. The words can also be taped in phrases which include the basic nouns, such as "to the boy" or "down the road." This method also enhances reading fluency and hence comprehension.

The Language Master or similar machines are a favorite with most students because they can listen to the instructor card and immediately repeat and listen to their own recorded voice. Words or phrases can be printed directly on the cards or clipped to the cards so that they can be used in a variety of ways.

Film strips of the basic words or word phrases are also available. These can be used in a regular filmstrip machine or in a tachistoscope. The tachistoscope has the advantage of being automatically adjusted to various time exposures and its novelty appeals to many students. Of course, a faster reading rate or word recognition is also the goal.

Once a student has gained some proficiency in recognizing words on a basic vocabulary list, he should be provided with books which help him use and test his knowledge. There are sets of books published by the Garrard Press (4), and others which are written expressly for this purpose. The stories are popular with most children.

Once a class or group has been tested for its knowledge of the basic words, a teacher can set aside the words which are of particular difficulty to the students. Thereafter, she can use the "word-a-day" approach to help master these words. One method is for the teacher to carry the words with her, in a pocket or tucked in a belt perhaps. During any period, she can flash the card to the group or to a particular child in an effort to help them master it.

Summary

In summary, a sight vocabulary is the number of words a child can recognize automatically. Growth in this area is one of the important signs of reading development. The words in a basic vocabulary are often referred to as "service words" and they make up about 70 percent of first readers and "easy to read" library books. Recognition of these words, at sight, is essential if a child is to become a rapid competent reader. It is hoped that the suggestions in this article will provide an adequate and comprehensive outline for teaching frequently used words. All of the games and suggestions can be imple-

mented by teachers or by tutors and parents, and many of them can be enjoyed by groups of students with very little supervision by the teacher.

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