

Sight words

A sight word is any word that is instantly and easily recognised from memory whether it is phonically regular or irregular.

Sight word vocabulary

A primary goal for beginning readers is to recognise words immediately by securing the spellings of the words to both their pronunciations and meanings in memory (Ehri 2014). These words may be referred to as sight words or a sight word vocabulary.

Mental graphemic representations

Mental graphemic representations are formed by the connections made between phonological, orthographic and semantic knowledge as new words are decoded (Masterton and Apel 2019). This process is called orthographic mapping. Repeated decoding of words enables them to be committed to memory as a mental graphemic representation (a sight word).

Developing sight words

A sight word vocabulary is the ever-expanding bank of words that are automatically and effortlessly recognised. Sight word vocabulary is NOT based on visual memory or visual skills. Becoming a reader with a large repertoire of sight words requires knowledge of phonemic segmentation, letter-sound correspondences, and spelling patterns (Kim, Apel and Al Otaiba 2013). Through connecting the word's spelling, pronunciation and meaning, mental graphemic representations are developed, stored and retrieved instantaneously during reading (Ehri 2014, 2015; Miles et al. 2019).

Teaching sight words

Teaching of mental graphemic representations should be aligned with synthetic phonics instruction (phonemic and orthographic blending, segmenting and manipulating) and should provide opportunities for authentic reading and writing practice. Research indicates that using whole word memorisation of sight words is an inefficient and ineffective way to teach reading for both beginning and struggling readers (Catts, McIlbraith, Bridges and Nelson 2017).

High frequency words

Sight word learning refers to acquiring both high frequency words and mental graphemic representations. High frequency words occur often in both spoken and written language. High frequency words are often selected for sight word instruction as they support students' early self-confidence and self-perception as a reader (Apel, Henbest, and Masterson 2019).

High frequency words, words that occur often in spoken and written language, support a child's accessibility to decodable texts for meaningful rehearsal of learnt code. Instruction of high frequency words should include the study of the parts of the words that are familiar, whilst also noting any difficult or unknown parts and linking these to the pronunciation of the word.

The Language and Literacy Team

For more information, contact your school speech language pathologist or the Reading and Writing Disorders Advisory Service. The Advisory service may be accessed by telephone or email on weekdays between 8:30am and 4:30pm.

Phone: (07) 3328 6950

Email: readingandwritingdisorders@qed.qld.gov.au