

Sight words

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

Reading automaticity

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). Accuracy and automaticity of word reading rely on systematic, synthetic phonics combined with repeated rehearsal of the decoding and encoding process in order to build a sight vocabulary for fluent reading.

Developing a vocabulary of 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. 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). 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).

Mental graphemic representations

Repeated decoding and encoding integrates students' phonological (sound), orthographic (spelling), and semantic (meaning) knowledge about words. Through connecting the word's spelling, pronunciation and meaning, mental graphemic representations are developed, stored and retrieved instantaneously during reading (Ehri 2014, 2015; Masterton and Apel 2019; Miles et al. 2019). This process is called orthographic mapping and is critical for fluent word reading.

High frequency words

High frequency words, words that occur often in spoken and written language, support a student's accessibility to decodable texts for meaningful rehearsal of learnt code (Apel, Henbest, and Masterson 2019). In beginning reading instruction, where readers have been exposed to minimal phonic code, a small number of carefully selected high frequency words is taught (Dixon et al. 2002; Shapiro and Solity 2016). 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.

Reading fluency

Reading fluency is generally defined as having three components: accuracy, the sounding out of words with minimal errors; rate, the effortless and automatic recognition and production of a word; and prosody, which refers to the way readers use appropriate rhythm, tone, pitch, pauses and stresses while reading (Álvarez-Cañizo et al. 2015; Elhassan et al. 2015; Kuhn and Stahl 2003). Fluent readers are able to decode words quickly and accurately, freeing up cognitive resources to focus their attention to the task of comprehending connected text.

Next steps

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.

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