

SIGHT WORD RECOGNITION AND READING PROFICIENCY

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Abstract

A Research Project Addressing Sight Word Recognition and Reading Proficiency

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There is a large body of research surrounding the importance of teaching sight words in the classroom as a key component of any reading program because of the relationship that exists between sight words recognition and reading proficiency. Students encounter many different unfamiliar words as they read daily in classrooms across the nation and they struggle to read proficiently. So, the question remains, is there a correlation between sight word recognition and reading proficiency?

The following study took place in a Kindergarten classroom, aiming to gather data about students' ability to read sight words and their original reading level compared to these two items many weeks later after targeted instruction.

Although the data does not give enough information to make answer the research question, it does imply things and sheds light on some themes – these themes including sight word recognition and its relationship to fluency and comprehension as well as varying methods for teaching sight words.

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Introduction

“I lllllllllkkkk.....lick? apples,” sssssssaaaaaaddddd sad? a girl.’ “I lllllllllkkkk...lick? ice cream,” sssssssssaaaaaaddddd sad? a girl.’ These are some of the many predictable sentences Kindergartners struggle with regularly. “I” and “a” are easy. If they know the letters, they know the words. “Apples” and “ice cream” are easy because they see these in the picture. “Girl” is simple because it is decodable. *Said* and *like* are difficult because they are not decodable placing them among many sight words early readers obtain as they learn to read. Sight words are words that a reader can recall automatically. However, students are often very good decoders, able to break down words into smaller parts to help aid in their reading. This is something that usually cannot be done with sight words. Readers need a bank of high frequency or sight words that they can read automatically without decoding whether the word is or is not decodable. This allows them to be more proficient readers, better comprehenders, and more fluent readers.

I am making the argument that students struggle to read well because they lack a sufficient sight word vocabulary. Early readers struggle when they approach a sight word they cannot automatically recall, and thus, cannot decode. These words are vital to students' ability to read as well as vital to students' reading comprehension. Students cannot comprehend what they are reading if they are constantly stopping to decode words instead of using their ability to read sight words automatically.

I have seen many students in my years of teaching struggle in the area of reading and I am making the argument that there is a direct connection between sight word recall and reading ability as defined by proficiency, which includes decoding words, comprehending text, and reading with fluency and accuracy.

In Sue Teele's book, *Overcoming Barricades to Reading* she claims, "I have also noticed that some children can decode words very effectively... but are unable to identify sight words" (2004, pg. xii) which is a flaw in today's education system. Even the best of teachers fail to provide appropriate opportunities and

experiences for children to learn these words and students continue to struggle because of their inability to recall sight words. This is my purpose for this research project.

Literature Review

There is a large body of research regarding sight words and their relationship to all areas of reading. In light of this project, I have found that recent research has indicated that many struggling readers lack an appropriate sight word vocabulary and their reading is suffering because of this. Similar themes are found in all of the research. Sight words and their relationship to fluency and comprehension as well as students' frequency of practice with sight words all showed up in much of the research I did. I think the overarching theme of poor sight word recall is very evident in today's primary classroom.

Unfortunately, it is something that, if not solved early, could also be a reading barricade in secondary classrooms. The research available about sight words

crosses all cultural, racial, gender, and geographical lines thus giving it increasingly more credibility. In this literature review I will outline the research that is available about sight word recall and fluency and sight word recall and comprehension, as well as sight word recall and the different methods used to improve this area in the primary classroom. The current available research indicates this is not an unsolvable problem.

Fluency

As defined by the Webster's Revised Unabridged Dictionary, fluency is "the quality of being fluent; smoothness; readiness of utterance; volubility" (<http://www.dictionary.com>). A fluent reader reads smoothly, reads well, reads without unnecessary pause or hesitation, and a fluent reader does not stop to sound out or stumble over sight words. A common problem that occurs when a child cannot recognize or decode a word is that their fluency rate decreases. It is impossible to read fluently while sounding out every written word. Duffy and Allington reiterate in their book *Explaining Reading*,

“You cannot read smoothly and fluently...if you cannot quickly say the words [sight words]. Good readers memorize words once they have seen them a few times. Without a large stock of sight words, reading becomes a laborious, slow, and boring task of figuring out word after word” (2003, pg. 28-29).

Again and again I read how important sight word recall is to so many aspects of reading but firstly, to fluency. I have seen many struggling beginning readers begin to hate reading because their poor sight word recall is getting in the way of their ability to easily read text. If students are able to read fluently because the skill of sight word recall is in place, they will be more interested in reading, more motivated, and, most importantly, more successful in reading. In Sue Teele’s book, she discovered that students must be able to recognize many words automatically (thus the need for a sight word vocabulary) in order to become fluent readers (2004). I have seen this in my own classroom where students struggle as they come to a sight word and lose fluency because they stop to

stumble on a particular word. Teele's observations allowed her to see student learning first hand (2004). She found that teachers who taught both decoding skills as well as memorization of sight words "...assist[ed] students in developing fluency" (2004, pg. 59). In Evelyn Guy's writing on helium.com, she emphasizes that in her teaching experience, sight word efficiency does allow students to read with greater fluency (2008) while "an over dependence on phonics and 'sounding out' greatly hinders fluency" (2008). Fluency is one area in which excellent sight word recall could impact readers in a dramatic and positive way. The Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement notes,

"Proficient readers recognize the vast majority of words in texts quickly, allowing them to focus on the meaning of the text. Since approximately 300 words account for the 65% of the words in texts, rapid recognition of these words during the primary grades forms the foundation of fluent reading" (www.ciera.org).

This organization that researches best methods for teaching all early readers the skills they need to be proficient readers, reiterates one of the themes I am finding in all the research surrounding sight words. Proficiency in reading centers on a student's ability to read fluently and their ability to comprehend what they are reading. Just as this research points out, a student cannot comprehend until they are able to read fluently which is exactly what quick sight word recall allows. Once fluency is in place, a reader can focus on comprehending the text.

Comprehension

In order to be a successful reader, one must not only be able to recall sight words and be fluent but must also be able to comprehend the text. This skill is often lacking in the early grades because so much of a reader's energy is spent decoding unknown words and attempting to read fluently. Lori Jamison Rog emphasizes the need for students to recognize many words automatically in order to be successful in the area of fluency..."which has been closely linked to comprehension at all levels." (2003, pg. 96). In addition, Michael Pressley notes

that, “When a reader slowly analyzes a word into component sounds and blends them, a great deal of capacity is consumed, with relatively little left over for comprehension of the word” (2005, pg 68), thus impacting the student’s ability to comprehend the text as a whole. This is evident every time I read with a child who cannot recall sight words. They stumble on the sight words and spend all their time and energy trying to sound out words that often are not decodable and, in turn, lose the entire meaning of the text. Kate Cain and Jane Oakhill reiterate these thoughts throughout their text (2007). They note that “comprehension is the ultimate aim of reading and listening” (2007, pg xi). In the world of education, I often hear “comprehension is the goal to reading” and “we read to comprehend” and “reading is meaningless without comprehension” and in order for sufficient comprehension to occur, a solid foundational sight word recall bank must be available to a child. Teele quoting Adams says,

“...readers must become automatic decoders of words quickly in order to focus on meaning. In order to become automatic decoders, children need

to learn right away, when they begin the reading process, at least 200-300 sight words to enable them to have a repertoire of commonly used words...which allow them to attach words to meaning” (1990, pg. 59).

Students that spend all their time decoding all words lose the meaning they originally intended to gain in their reading quest. Sight words help students transition from reading words to reading for information.ing goal: to know what one has read – to comprehend.

Methods for Teaching Sight Words

Fluency and comprehension are themes woven into almost all literature about sight words. The third theme found in much of the literature about sight words discusses the various “best” methods for teaching sight words. In Hannah Trierweiler’s article, *Seven Ways to Make Sight Words Stick*, she explores just that: various games, time for writing practice, see-say-repeat practice, to name a few (2006, pg. 55-57). Others believe that the “perfect” word wall is the answer. In Pamela Chanko’s article about the “tasty word wall” (year, pg.55-56), she

indicates the need for a word wall that includes sight words and ways in which families can practice those words at home with their students. Teele also emphasizes in her book the importance of using a concentration game so students can match the spoken words with the written word (2004). The web site Child 1st.com claims that their research-based sight word intervention program is the best way for kids to learn sight words. "...Each sight word card is a powerful aid in reading comprehension, as it shows the child the meaning of the word, rather than just telling the child what the words says" (<http://www.child1st.com>). Their method includes sight word cards with picture cues that are supposed to help students read the words and understand their purposes in sentences so a student is better able to recall this efficiently, consistently, and continuously. Others believe creative ways of presenting the words to students will help them better hold the words in their long term memory and learn them, while others have additional varying philosophies about best sight word teaching practices.

Although varying methods exist, they all have the same basis for learning sight words – practice, practice, practice.

The web site SightWordsGame.com emphasizes the importance of students knowing sight words and recognizes that students need to “read quickly and effectively and children must learn to identify and understand these words instantly,” (Electronic reference 2008). The site investigates and reveals struggles all teachers have with teaching sight words in a meaningful way and in a way that students can grasp. Due to the nature of these words, they do not contain deep meaning nor do they lend themselves to picture clues and finally, they do not have simply understood definitions. How would a student define or make meaningful the word “the”?

Research Question

In light of this research involving the role and activities surrounding sight words, I am still left wondering what correlation there is between sight word recall and reading proficiency level. Do students read proficiently (with better fluency,

accuracy, and comprehension) when they can read sight words? With this in mind, I am also left wondering if boys or girls are more proficient in this area at the Kindergarten level and if a student's age impacts his or her ability to recall sight words. This research project seeks to examine the effectiveness of sight word recall and that connection to a student's ability to read proficiently.

Methodology

Method and Rationale

This study employs a quantitative correlational methodology looking at the relationship between students' sight word recognition and reading proficiency. A quantitative study focuses on data which can be captured and analyzed. The analysis required me to make some generalizations about the data as I observed the correlation between sight words learned and reading proficiency. This method is a good way to answer my primary and secondary research questions because I compared students' sight word vocabulary with their reading

proficiency by assessing the students' ability to read sight words in comparison to their reading level both before and after the instruction period. This allowed me to better understand how sight word recognition did (or did not) impact a child's reading proficiency.

I conducted an experiment and examined results as I employed learning opportunities and practice to help students learn sight words. I used this data and compared it to students' reading proficiency levels. I used this comparison method as I sought to understand the correlation between sight word recognition and reading proficiency. Students were pre-assessed on a pre-determined set of sight words (see Appendices A and B). I employed strategies for learning sight words and time for practice over 40 weeks. 40 weeks is sufficient time to allow for student growth, adding credibility to my research.

Sample

I studied a group of 20 kindergarten students. 18 of these 20 students have had prior preschool experience to some degree. These students are all

emerging readers in my classroom. They are excited about reading and interested in trying whatever they need to be successful readers. Many of them have strong home support with parents interested in their child's success in school. They all have at least one parent at home literate in the English language. 13 of these students are Caucasian, three are Asian, two are African American, and two are Hispanic. This sample of students is an appropriate sample for my research because they range in age, ability, race, socioeconomic status, and background. This diverse group allows me to examine the different strengths and weaknesses of different children in the area of reading although I will be making many generalizations, recognizing their varying backgrounds and the many variables that impact a student's ability to learn. All of these students live in the affluent area of Enatai in Bellevue, Washington, just outside the city of Seattle. Although the area is affluent, not all of the students share in this financial lifestyle. 13 percent of the students at my school receive free or reduced lunch, leaving 87 percent not receiving the aid. Essentially, this leaves

2.6 students in m class on free and reduced lunch with 17.3 not receiving aid

(www.bsd405.org/enatai).

Instrumentation

As I began collecting data, I did a pre-assessment of sight word recognition of each student using a pre-determined list of 228 words and compared this to their current reading level. Each student was given the opportunity to read as many words in a 12-word set as they could. Once they reached a set they were unable to read all words from, their pre-assessment was stopped. Each set increased slightly in difficulty (more letters, more syllables, less familiar) as well as decreasing in students' exposure to the word (moving from *the*, for example, to *together*). Upon completion of this forty week research project, I re-assessed students to see which words they learned and compared that to their current reading level, now 40 weeks later. The students received weekly whole-group instruction using word chants, word cheers, and individualized practice time to help learn the sight words that increased their

automaticity and proficiency in reading and thus, their fluency and comprehension too, ideally. I created the sight word list and it is a compilation of high frequency words and Bellevue School District formal assessment sight words - see Appendices A & B. The measure used for assessing reading proficiency is Wireless Generation's DIBELS TRC (<https://dibels.uoregon.edu>). TRC stands for Text and Reading Comprehension. The same TRC measure with benchmarking texts was used at the pre-assessment time as well as the post-assessment time at the conclusion of data collection. There was no specialized instruction aimed at improving students' reading level as I thought that would eliminate credibility from the sight word data collection already taking place.

There are several possible variables that could impact a child's performance – their attitude, what they ate for breakfast prior to any of the assessments, attendance, learning opportunities, and the support and practice they are receiving at home, to name a few. Unending variables require me to

make generalizations. This collection system provides credibility because there is a large body of research already that shows students are better readers when they have a large bank of sight words. Secondly, real Kindergarten students who are learning to read will be used in this project making a very appropriate and credible sample. The list of sight words students will be tested from is compiled from research-based chosen words.

This collection system also provides anonymity because students were not exposed to anything different than they typically would in a classroom with always changing instruction to better meet their needs. Students' actual names are not used in the research project and students' sight word scores and reading levels used in this project will be indicated with a randomly selected student number to maintain anonymity of both their names and their academic performance.

The Researcher

As the researcher of this project, I bring biases. As the students' teacher, I have built a relationship with these students and certain instructional practices are already in place. I know these students and I make assumptions about their willingness and ability to learn. However, as a teacher, as their teacher, I strongly believe that kids do not know sight words and believe this impacts their reading on multiple levels. Since the data I analyzed is objective as I will only be looking at numbers, it was not difficult to leave my biases to the side. I still form opinions and theories about students' abilities to learn sight words as I examine my data but since my analysis is with the numbers, these opinions and theories do not impact my research and analysis.

Procedure

I will analyze my data by looking at:

- a) the number of sight words students knew prior to the intervention and data collection,

- b) the number of sight words students knew at the conclusion of the intervention of data collection, and
- c) the correlation between sight word recognition and reading proficiency before and after.

For the purposes of this research project, reading proficiency is defined using the DIBELS TRC measure to determine the student's reading level, which encompasses fluency, comprehension, and accuracy in reading. I believe this gives a valid assessment of a student's reading proficiency as the DIBELS TRC measure (Dynamic Indicators of Basic Early Literacy Skills Text & Reading Comprehension) is research-based and widely used. I looked for trends in the data. I was interested to see if students did better or worse acquiring a large bank of recognizable sight words depending on their race, their age, and their gender. Finally, I am interested in seeing if certain sight words are more difficult to recall for students than others.

Data

The table below indicates the sight word and reading proficiency pre and post assessment results.

Sight Word & Reading Level Pre and Post Assessment Results

Student Identification Number	Sight words known before data collection	Reading level before data collection	Sight words known at conclusion of data collection	Reading level at conclusion of data collection
1	17	RB	224	F
2	23	RB	227	E
3	1	<PC	94	C
4	0	<PC	33	B
5	0	<PC	129	C
6	0	<PC	82	RB
7	4	<PC	93	C
8	1	<PC	164	F
9	1	<PC	58	C
10	0	<PC	24	A
11	17	<PC	194	F
12	0	<PC	75	B
13	1	<PC	120	D
14	8	RB	93	D
15	0	<PC	43	RB
16	0	<PC	15	RB
17	12	<PC	228	E
18	7	<PC	83	C
19	8	B	132	E
20	0	<PC	0	<PC

The reading levels are as follows:

<PC: less than print concepts – cannot identify basic print features

PC – identifies basic print features

RB – reading behaviors – pre-reading skills

A-Z: reading levels that build upon each other, beginning with A.

*after PC and RB are mastered.

A Look at Students' Race Compared to Their Learning Increase

Race	Average Sight Words Learning Increase (%)	Average Reading Level Increase (# of levels jumped)
Caucasian	48.7%	5.5
Asian	46.3%	4.3
Hispanic	9.4%	1
African American	46.9%	2.5

Data Analysis

As noted previously in the research paper, upon completion of the literature review, this research project aimed to examine what correlation there is between sight word recall and reading level. In the case of every student but

one, students were able to recall more sight words and their reading proficiency level increased. I do not think my data is inconclusive, and I do think my research shows a correlation between sight word reading and reading proficiency level. However, with the number of variables involved in early reading, I think more data is necessary to prove that such a close link exists between sight word reading and reading proficiency.

Although more data is necessary to truly show a link between sight word reading and reading level proficiency, I was able to elicit additional information from the data I collected. One thing I aimed to look at was a child's race and how that impacts his/her growth throughout the study. As illustrated on the previous page, the Caucasian students in my class averaged a more dramatic average increase in sight words learned and reading level increase. Again, this gives some information but is not conclusive. This data alone does not give enough information to declare that a child's race impacts his or her ability to learn sight words and, in turn, become a more proficient reader.

As I analyzed the data, one more thing I looked for were particular words that kids struggled with. The words that showed up again and again were those multi-syllabic words. These words are more difficult to memorize, making it more difficult for students to remember, read, and recall.

Recommendations

I think ultimately, it is clear that several things need to happen. Students need continual practice and instruction centered on sight words because a student's ability to read a memorized word plays a huge role in a student's ability to read proficiently. However, if I am perfectly honest, I cannot say it is the data specifically that speaks to this. My professional experience as a teacher, coupled with the data, points to the need for students to have more practice instruction with sight words.

Students should be exposed to and given practice with sight words on a consistent basis. There is a lot of research about best ways for teaching these

words to students, but for purposes of this research project, the theme that stuck out was the importance of being consistent. It is not so important to employ a particular method when teaching these words as long as one uses a single method and sticks with it. This method allows students to learn the words and not waste their time learning the next method for sharing their knowledge. Once they know the instruction and practicing system, they can focus on the words.

Although the data suggests many things and does show the importance of sight word instruction and practice, the most important recommendation I have is to continue research and data collection so as to have more viable data to show the correlation.

Conclusion

The student that originally read...

“I llllllllllkkkk.....lick? apples,” sssssssaaaaaaddddd sad? a girl.’ “I

llllllllllkkkk...lick? ice cream,” sssssssssaaaaaaddddd sad? a girl.’ Now reads, “I

like apples, said a girl. I like ice cream, said a girl.” That is music to a primary teacher’s ears. It is evident to me from the data that the sight word instruction benefited this child and others. I have seen them build that sight word bank, which empowers them in their reading. Not only can she and others read the sentence, but they can also read more complex emergent reader texts with fluency and accuracy, while comprehending what they are reading – all thanks to the sight word bank that is now in place – a foundational piece for an early reader.

I was not surprised by most of the data I collected and analyzed and believe the data does point to a correlation between an emergent reader’s sight word vocabulary and their reading proficiency level. Within that, I think further action research, data collection, and data analysis truly is needed to improve one’s ability to effectively teach sight words to students.

I found in my literature review the importance of using an effective method for teaching sight words and am thus interested in continuing research in the

area of research based methods for teaching sight words. I read again and again how important it is to teach sight words using a research based method but really struggled to find many research based methods and believe this would be a helpful next step.

All in all, I am now more interested than ever in effectively teaching my students sight words because I see just how valuable it is to their development as emerging readers. Though additional research is needed, I still see a connection between sight word reading and reading proficiency.

I am left with many questions as I move into continued research about sight words. Are their sight word teaching methods that are research based and proven to help students learn sight words? What has been shown to be the most effective way to teach sight words? Are some methods very ineffective? What are the best ways to teach Hispanic students? These are all questions I plan to pursue in my future research as an inquisitive primary teacher wishing to teach her students in the best way possible.

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Appendix A
Sight Word List Sets 1-10

Set 1:

the	of	and	a	to	in
is	you	that	it	he	for

Set 2:

was	on	are	as	with	his
that	at	be	this	from	I

Set 3:

have	or	by	one	had	not
but	what	all	were	when	we

Set 4:

there	can	an	your	which	their
said	if	do	will	each	about

Set 5:

how	up	out	them	then	she
many	some	so	these	would	other

Set 6:

into	has	more	her	two	like
him	see	time	could	no	make

Set 7:

than	first	been	its	who	now
people	my	made	over	did	down

Set 8:

only	way	find	use	may	water
long	little	very	after	words	called

Set 9:

just	where	most	know	get	through
back	much	feet	side	school	until

Set 10:

food	children	land	without	boy	animal
enough	four	above	began	once	life

Appendix B
Sight Word List Sets 11-19

Set 11:

took	head	kind	almost	live	got
need	hand	year	light	page	earth

Set 12:

far	high	mother	country	go	good
new	write	our	me	man	too

Set 13:

any	day	same	right	look	think
also	around	another	came	come	work

Set 14:

three	must	because	does	part	even
place	well	such	here	take	why

Set 15:

help	put	different	away	again	off
went	old	number	tell	say	every

Set 16:

still	name	great	men	small	found
between	should	left	along	might	sound

Set 17:

saw	thought	end	while	next	below
something	both	few	always	large	together

Set 18:

house	world	those	show	often	asked
don't	going	want	important	form	keep

Set 19:

father	night	being	second	story	white
let	picture	study	soon	since	ever