Phonics and Word Study: Instructional Activities to Develop Sight Word Vocabulary

Phonics instruction typically includes activities to develop students' sight word vocabularies. A sight word vocabulary is a store of words that a student can identify automatically (or by sight without a need to decode). Many people equate high frequency words (words that are frequently encountered when reading and writing like *have* and *was*) with sight word vocabularies. However, sight word vocabularies are comprised of all words that are known automatically, including high frequency words as well as decodable words. The goal is to help your students develop a considerable store of words they know by sight. Even with words that are considered phonetically irregular, you should begin sight word instruction with explicit talk about the features of the words that are phonetically regular. For example, *said* is phonetically regular in its initial and final sounds, /s/ and /d/. This section describes three instructional techniques:

- Concept of Word Activities
- Word Wall and Word Bank
- Review Games

Concept of Word Activities

Before children can develop much of a sight vocabulary, they need to have a concept of word. A child's concept of word is the ability to match spoken words to written words while reading connected text. In other words, a student who has a concept of word is able to "read the white spaces;" s/he is aware of where one word ends and another begins. Without at least a rudimentary concept of word, instruction in sight words is futile.

Your students will begin to get anchors in the early preprimers and rhymes that they track as they learn letter sounds and a few words. For example, a child reading the sentence "He can carry the puppy." may point to *carry* and *the* while saying *carry*, because *carry* is a two-syllable word. Once this child has learned some letter sounds and has acquired an awareness of words and syllables, s/he will point to *puppy* while saying *the* and know that a mistake has been made. This will happen either because s/he knows that *the* does not start with a "p," s/he knows the word *the*, and/or s/he realizes that *puppy* is one word but two syllables.

You can help your students develop a concept of word through activities that will anchor them in text (i.e., letter sound instruction and word identification) and through activities that emphasize words and word boundaries. Two activities that emphasize word boundaries and are easy to incorporate into literacy lessons are tracking familiar and/or memorized text and cutting up sentences from these texts. You should have repetitive (predictable) nursery rhymes or jingles and multiple texts at the *readiness* and *preprimer a* (or *preprimer 1*) level to provide opportunities for your students to practice tracking in real books. Natural language, predictable texts work well at this stage. Like in the PALS Concept of Word procedure, you would first help your students become familiar with and even sometimes memorize a short nursery rhyme, jingle, or early preprimer text. Your support during instruction through choral and echo reading paired with the support of the predictable text (predictable text and heavy picture support) allows your students to "read" without having completely memorized the text. After your students are familiar with and/or memorized the text, you supply them with the print version for them to track as they vocalize the words. Students can track with special pointers as a motivator, or they can fingerpoint as they read. Notice in this picture that the teacher is using a four-line rhyme that emphasizes a letter sound from their phonics lesson. This teacher has also chosen to

put the rhyme on sentence strips in a pocket chart.

Sentences from a memorized text can be cut (either by you as a model or by your students for practice) at the spaces to emphasize the word boundaries. The sentence should first be read in its entirety and then cut apart. Discuss how many words in the sentence before rebuilding the sentence. Students may need to look at the sentence in the original rhyme or book as a support while rebuilding. These words can also be placed in the pocket chart over the top of the words in the original sentence. This picture shows a student rebuilding sentences that had been cut apart by placing the words in a pocket chart.

Word Wall and Word Bank

Once students have a concept of word, they will begin to recognize and remember many words from the stories that they read. Words can either be collected on a large chart for group reference (Word Wall), or they can be collected in a personal collection of words for individual student reference (Word Bank). This picture shows you a personal word wall that is easy to make using file folders. Words with high utility (frequently found in texts and used in writing) and words with which students have difficulty should be emphasized. Limit the number that are introduced in one lesson (typically two to five words) and be cautious of graphically similar words that may be confusing (e.g., *was* and *saw*). Sounding out the words as they are introduced allows students to confirm what they know since many of the features are phonetically regular. Words can be categorized in a variety of ways (e.g., alphabetical order or similar spelling patterns). Previously taught word review is a critical part of Word Wall and Word Bank activities.

Review Games

Word Walls and Word Banks are not bulletin boards and, therefore, should be complemented with review activities and games. As always, these activities should be done with your supervision initially before placing them in independent work or centers. Your students need repetition with these words in a variety of contexts. For example, they need to read them, make them, and write them. To do these three things, you would first write the target words on cards for your students to read. Next, you would have your students make the words using letter tiles, magnetic letters, link letters, etc. Your students would then write the words in their notebooks with the support of the word card if necessary. These words can be introduced in your small groups, and your students can practice them (making them out of letter tiles and recording them in their notebooks) during independent work or in centers.

Along with practice, your students must relate these words that they are learning in isolation to connected text. You can achieve this by having them "hunt" for words in the books that you are reading. Make sure that you have them "hunt" in texts that they have already read. You can also have them record the words they find for additional practice.

Bingo is a game that is easy to make according to your needs (and differentiate according to your students' needs), and it is always fun. In order to provide extra practice reading the target words in context, you can write short sentences instead of simply writing the words on word cards. The sentences should be short and include the target words, which are underlined in the sentence. Each student takes turns drawing a sentence. After reading the sentence aloud, the student writes the target word on a separate piece of paper that is placed on the Bingo board as a marker. The game can be played in various ways: traditional Bingo, four corners, black out, etc. This game can also be played using word wall (or word bank) words only rather than with sentences.

Another game option to review sight words is called *Build-a-Sun*. During this game, each player should have a yellow circle representing a sun without rays. Sentences including a target high frequency word should be written on individual pieces of paper. As in the Bingo game described above, each student takes turns drawing a sentence. After reading the sentence aloud, the student writes the target word on a separate word card (shaped like a ray) and adds the ray to their sun. Like Bingo, this game can also be played using word wall (or word bank) words only rather than with sentences.

Oh No! is another game that is easy to do in any small group setting and takes no preparation time. First, you place approximately twenty sight word cards face down on the table along with two cards that say *Oh No!* Students take turns drawing a card and reading it. If they read it automatically, they keep it. The game can be timed, which adds a fun element, allowing three to five minutes for play according to the number of word cards you use. If a student draws an *Oh No!* card, s/he must return all her/his accumulated cards to the table. The *Oh No!* card is not returned, because it becomes out of play once it is drawn. To add another element, you can have students write sentences using a small number of their words or simply write the words or build the words with letter tiles for extra practice.

Another easy way to review sight words is to use generic game boards. A generic game board should have spaces with numbers (generally one, two, or three). Students must pick up the number of words cards designated by the space on which they land. After reading the words aloud, the student keeps them in their "bank." The student with the most cards at the end of play is the winner. As with *Oh No!*, the students can write their words or write sentences with their words for extra practice.

◈ Please feel free to download and use any of the activities and information that we have provided. You may contact the Reading First office at the University of Virginia if you have any questions.