

Basic Sight Vocabulary – A Help Or A Hindrance?

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Perhaps the most difficult task of the corrective-remedial teacher concerns the problem of basic sight vocabulary. The poor reader has a smattering of half-learned, often confused words to support his pitiful attempts at reading. A variety of instructional techniques have been developed but the acquisition of a substantial number of basic or service words remains a continuing problem for both the moderate and severe reading disability.

A typical and comprehensive example of service words is the list developed by Dr. Edward Dolch. The Dolch Basic Sight Vocabulary List is widely used as the basis for the reading series written by Dolch and others for use specifically with retarded readers. The Dolch list, made up of 220 words, "constitutes about 65%, of all words in the reading material of the primary grades and nearly 60%, of those in the intermediate grades."¹ The problem of the retarded reader is complex and frustrating, for until he develops mastery of these necessary "cluing" words, he is unable to utilize context as a technique in deciphering unknown words. He stumbles through every passage read, making numerous errors until he is thoroughly defeated.

Children who suffer this type of disability, literally all of the hardcore cases, are doomed without specific diagnosis and rehabilitation. Unfortunately, the number of children receiving this kind of help is infinitesimally small and the number of people trained to dispense it even smaller.

It seems obvious then that the only way to eradicate or at least lessen the problem, is to search for an answer to the question, "Why are so many children crippled because of their inability to cope with the problems imposed by the basic or sight vocabulary?"

Over the past several years, a number of answers to the question have become apparent as a result of practical research with hundreds of disabled children. First, the very nature of a basic sight vocabulary is an immediate stumbling block to large numbers of children. It imposes severe handicaps on the culturally deprived, the visually or aurally immature, children suffering from visual or auditory perception or discrimination difficulty, those experiencing directional control problems and the child with speech difficulty.

Service words must be mastered if progress is to be made in the developmental reading programs used in the schools. Yet these words are for the most part un-phonetic, abstract, and not liable to precise definition. Instructions accompanying the Dolch Sight Vocabulary Cards state that these are "Words - pronouns, adjectives, etc. - which cannot be learned from pictures, yet must be known if a child is to read with confidence." Understanding must come then through usage learned from the child's speech models, or during a relatively short exposure to these words in school situations.

It is a fact that great numbers of children have not learned and are not learning these words, either at sight or with confidence. The distinct possibility exists that perhaps basic words, learned at sight, are not the best way to initiate reading instruction in view of the failure of so many to develop reading skills by means of this technique.

A second possible answer to the question suggests itself. Every teacher has seen the havoc that confused perceptual responses can cause. There are cases that can best be described as being massive in that intelligent reading is impossible because of the profusion of confused, omitted and substituted words. A close look at the Dolch list offers a possible explanation for this phenomenon. The number of words of similar configuration is immediately apparent. Once a child experiences difficulty and has only configuration to rely on as a tool of attack, he becomes heir to all the errors of generations of disabled readers.

Confusing words of similar configuration is a fault more or less common to all reading disabilities. It is likewise apparent in many normally proficient readers and possibly acts as an inhibitory factor in full reading comprehension. The possibilities for confused responses are infinite, especially when it is remembered that instruction in the alphabet and phonics as aids in word recognition are instituted after, or at best, simultaneous with, the learning of words at sight.²

Once a confused perceptual pattern becomes established, it becomes the child's habitual response pattern for printed symbols unless replaced with a different approach. Attempts at instruction in the basic sight words without simultaneous instruction in word and letter recognition are generally unsuccessful for remedial students. Table I indicates some of the possible configurational confusions with words found on the Dolch list. Table II is a list of confused responses observed and recorded through the years by this instructor, errors believed to flow directly from initial word and letter confusions.

TABLE I

This table contains words selected from the Dolch Basic Sight Vocabulary List which have configurational similarity and have the potential to contribute to the development of visual response patterning which is unreliable and confused.

is-in-on-no-an-or	come-came-can
at-to-it-if-of-off	is-as-am-an-any
we-me-my-may-many	do-does-goes-go
be-by-buy-big	give-gave-get
he-her-here-where-were	not-no-on-now
were-weren't-want-when-then	full-fall-fell
in-an-are-any-many	but-put-pull-push
call-cold-could-would	be-he-the-we
they-then-them-there-their	live-like
well-will-with-which-wish	or-are-of-on
new-now-how-who-own-no	then-when
you-your-our-or	up-us-use
his-him-had-has-have	up-us-use
there-where-were	so-soon
these-those-this-that	for-from-of

TABLE II

This table contains a number of observed errors over a period of years and which appear to be the direct result of early configurational confusion with resultant confused visual response patterning.

about-above	ever-even-never	main-mountain
aim-am-I'm	eyes-yes	memorial-memories
aimed-named	face-force	other-older
alike-Alice	fast – first	parrot-pattern
away-always	feeding-feeling	plant-paint
barn-burn	five-fire-fine-find	quiet-quite-quick
beak-back	fly-flew	raised-risen
beat-bird-ball	fluttering-floating	robbing-rubbing
bees-hears	for-your	sad-said
beneath-beneficial	forest-fasten	sharpen-sandpaper
build-built	forty-thirty	shot-sort
burn-brown	friend-fellows	sight-straight
calf-clip	funny-furry	sincerity-insect
chance-change	grain-green	speeding-sleeping
circus-circle	greater-getting	something-sometimes
clawing-climbing	guard-ground	stuck-stick
clear-clean	had-hid	stung-struck
cloth-clothes	having-waving	sweet-soft
cooked-cooled	head-heard	tell-tall
creatures-cutters	heart-head-hard-hand	told-took-talk
cuffs-covers	helmet-metal	thin-tiny
damaged-danger	home-horse-house	took-tool
darting-darkening	horny-hungry	tried-tied
decided-destroyed	hunt-hurt	troops-trappers
drink-duck	inked-alike	trot-trip
drive-dive	into-until	warring-worrying
drop-drip	lay-laid	was-weed
eagle-age	lead-learn	went-wait
even-eleven	lives-leaves	whip-wipe
evening-eleventh	made-marry	winter-water

A third possible answer to the question relates to the problem of reversals. This is an area in which considerable research has been done but which continues to confound all teachers of reading. There is as yet no definite understanding of the causes of reversals and, of more concern to teachers, there is no pragmatic approach that guarantees correction.³ Is it possible that the research done has been oriented along the wrong lines and that the answer lies in another, less complex direction?

When a child is exposed to a word at sight, prior to alphabetic training or instruction in phonics, he is of necessity responding to a configuration or shape. Thus when the word in is taught, the child responds, not to two separate symbols in a serial arrangement, symbols that have unique and recognizable visual and auditory characteristics, but rather his response is primarily directed toward an immediate perception of a configuration – in

When he is then exposed to words of similar configuration, what assurance do we have that the child has observed the subtle changes which have occurred within the configuration, as in the word no? In fact, what assurance do we have that the word no will not elicit the same response? The child at this time is immature and does not possess well-developed powers of discrimination, either aurally or visually. His capacity for directional control is in the formative stages and will take months, even years, to stabilize into an unflinching left-right response pattern.⁴

The possibility exists that reversals are not caused in all cases by confused dominance. Rather, it is eminently possible that they are the result of confused visual response patterning caused by the introduction of whole words before the child is prepared to respond with a consistent, serial method of apprehension. The child who has not developed an understanding of the serial nature of language, or who has not acquired a thorough recognition of the letters of the alphabet, is liable to the evident confusions that result from the similarities inherent in the English print system.

What is the difference between was saw can sun or in is an on no me we to the child who isn't cognizant of the nuances of the letters comprising the language and who is responding primarily to word configuration? Table III contains a partial list of words on the Dolch list which lend themselves to reversal, stemming again from faulty visual patterning resulting from too early exposure to whole words.

Because of the primarily visual nature of initial instruction in sight words, the retarded reader uses visual clues as his initial means of word attack. It follows that confusion about letters and words, because of unreliable directional control, would cripple even the most intelligent and well-motivated students. Table IV contains a partial list of observed reversals which it has been concluded are a natural outgrowth of the condition described.

There has been, and will continue to be, a controversy over the whole word method as opposed to the phonetic approach to reading instruction. It isn't intended here to fan the fires of that controversy but rather to offer new direction in the search for answers.

There are a great many questions which need to be answered. Does initial exposure to whole words establish a habitual response pattern that makes later instruction in the alphabet and phonics almost futile? How permanent and pervasive is the damage resulting from early discrimination and directional difficulties? Should the alphabet be taught prior to formal reading instruction as an aid to the child in word recognition? Should words of a concrete and phonetic nature be taught initially to develop a more sound understanding of the structure and serial nature of language? Are letter confusions the result of prior experiences with words of similar configuration which have elicited faulty visual and auditory responses? Do children from deprived backgrounds need a period of pro-school instruction prior to exposure to printed language? Do we have adequate programs for the early detection and remediation of potential reading disabilities?

More significantly, do the theories of D. O. Hebb, which indicate that perception is the result of serial apprehension, cast doubt on the almost universal acceptance of the whole word method as an initial teaching technique? ⁵ Dr. Hebb, of McGill University, has developed a theory of perception opposed to the idea of “gestalt” on which the whole word method is based. ⁶ Hebb states that “the course of perceptual learning in man is gradual, proceeding from a dominance of color, through a period of separate attention to each part of the figure, to a gradually arrived at identification of the whole as a whole, an apparently simultaneous instead of a serial apprehension.”⁷

Thus a child either unfamiliar with, or confused about, the letters of the alphabet, would be liable to a condition that could completely debilitate him. It is the opinion of this writer that this conclusion is present in sufficient numbers to warrant further investigation.

Many of the questions posed here lend themselves to investigation by classroom teachers interested in doing valuable and rewarding research at the local level. In the long run, it may be the teacher in the classroom who alone possesses the information requisite for any really constructive and basic changes.

TABLE III

This table contains words taken from the Dolch Basic Sight Vocabulary list which are particularly susceptible to reversal because of their structure.

are-red	eat-ate	him-my	never-every	own-now	you-not
at-to	far-ran	his-so	no-on	to-into	may-am
as-so	for-from	if-for	not-to	was-saw	in-no
big-go	got-to	let-tell	now-who	wash-shall	it-at
both-those	he-the	out-to	of-for	we-me	its-so
don't-not	help-play	my-am	one-no	were-write	just-start
where-here	with-that	you-they	how-who		

TABLE IV

This table contains a number of errors observed which are believed to result from early directional confusion and resultant unreliable visual response patterning. These errors are extremely subtle and do not always appear to be reversals. Most of the errors observed over the years can be traced to faulty visual or auditory clues. The errors are classed as horizontal reversals, vertical reversals, and a broad grouping involving the letters r-h-n-u-v-m.

Vertical

bad-pad	but-put	do-go	got-but
beed-beep	dad-pad	does-goes	me-we
but-pet	den-pen	drag-drop	pan-band

Horizontal

aimed-named	calm-clam	raised-risen	guard-ground	forest-fasten
beater-bailed	could-cloud	size-inside	inked-alike	helmet-metal
ben-den	deep-beep	eagle-age	line-outline	sight-straight
brood-barn	drag-gray	ever-very	stem-snert	whip-wipe
brown-drown	never-serve	eyes-yes	sun-us	
calf-clip	no-want	flat-calf	trap-tar	

r-h-u-n-v-w-m

behind-beneath	fire-five	hand-hard
diver-driven	funny-furry	no-more
even-over	gun-gum	not-you
find-five	met-net	often-after

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I originally published this as a scanned copy over a year ago. I am pleased to republish it in a freshly typed edition for quicker download and easier reading. This essay is one of the very finest exposes of the harm done by teaching a sight-word vocabulary to students beginning to learn to read. I would like to thank Mr. Laurita for giving me permission to republish this essay for free world wide distribution on the Internet.

Other essays by Mr. Laurita are available on the Education Page of my web site, www.donpotter.net. I especially recommend his masterpiece, *Orthographic Structuralism: The New Spelling*.