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A TEST OF THE UTILITY OF HIGH FREQUENCY WORDS

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How much utility there is for reading instruction in the lists of the most frequently used words (MFUW) has been a topic of great interest for several reading experts. For example, Dechant (1970, p. 248) notes that the 150 MFUW (in this case those of the basal readers from several different series) are "especially useful in group activities such as experience charts, word games and word drills." Durkin (1970, p. 118) also believes that these MFUW are "highly serviceable" for basal reader stories. So much so, she says (1970, p. 424), that one good way to diagnose children's speed-of-reading habits is to have them read Dolch's (1951) list of the MFUW. (Durkin appears to contradict herself on this matter, however, when she [1972, p. 249] insists on another occasion that "the easiest words to learn often are the least useful.") Heilman (1967, p. 189) agrees with the position that the MFUW are highly important when he comments that "a child who has trouble with many of these [the 100 MFUW] will find reading a frustrating task."

Reading experts have even discussed the stage in beginning reading at which the MFUW should be taught. Here they do not all agree, however. For example, Durkin (1972, p. 250) argues that beginning readers should first "Concentrate on words that are of special interest" to such children. Then, at some unnamed point later in time the teacher is advised "to start introducing [high frequency] words which might not be very appealing but which are, in fact, basically important." Jones (1971, p. 62) disagrees strongly about this. To her, "the learner will gain nothing by passing them [the MFUW] by for temporary learning." Thus, the child "might just as well learn them once and for all," Jones asserts. According to Veatch (1966, p. 218), however, all lists of the MFUW are beside the point. She maintains that "no words lists are needed from any other source" than the child's spoken language.

Shortcomings of the MFUW

Other experts in reading instruction are also not convinced that the materials for basal reading instruction should depend heavily on lists of the MFUW. For one thing, Smith (1971, pp. 8-9) points out that such high frequency words are not on all occasions equally recognizable. He reminds us that "one might think that for any given reader, a particular word would be just as easy or difficult to read in whatever circumstances it occurred. . . . But this is not the case; ease in identifying a word depends very much on the words around it and on our prior knowledge." Beyond this, Stauffer (1970,

p. 5) protests that a dependence on high frequency words, especially in basal readers, has resulted in a “vocabulary poverty” of such a nature that it “puts school children at a serious disadvantage.” Walcutt, et al. (1974, p. 7) agree. They observe that the writers of ordinary basal readers, influenced by the notion of the importance of high frequency words, require the child at the end of the third grade to learn to read only 1345 words. This, they claim, is far too few. A child at this level in school is “capable of reading in a vocabulary of 15,000 words, or more,” they avow.

Other Praise of the MFUW

It is obvious there is strong support for, and vigorous negative criticism against the idea that the MFUW have great utility for reading instruction. None voice the affirmative of this contention more resolutely than does Hillerich (1976, p. 59). He judges that the MFUW are the “context to use in unlocking strange words.” To this effect he offers his belief that if children can read the first ten of the MFUW they “can read a fourth of all words in any English book.” To Hillerich, “this is a tremendous return for a very few words. On the other hand, once one gets beyond the first hundred most frequently used words, there is a point of rapidly diminishing returns” from those gained from the first 100 MFUW. The MFUW are even related to reading disabilities, in Hillerich’s view. He notes that he has observed that “one of the most common symptoms with older disabled readers” is their inability to read the MFUW.

The Present Study

One way to determine the extent of the “returns” from the MFUW to the reader that Hillerich refers to is to examine basal reader passages at different grade levels to see how, in fact, the inclusion of successive segments of 100 MFUW (Carroll, Davies and Richman, 1971) affects their readability. For this purpose I selected passages of about 100 words in length that occurred at the halfway point in basal readers written for pupils in grades one through six (Fay, et al., 1972).

First, for each of these six passages the words that were not on a list of the first 100 MFUW (Carroll, Davies and Richman, 1971) were deleted. *Second*, the words appearing in these passages that were on a list of the second 100 MFUW were then reinserted in the passages. *Third*, this was then done for the third 100 MFUW.

Read the following passages by first eliminating the words in italics and in quotes (“ ”). The words remaining are those from the first 100 MFUW used in the given passage. This exemplifies how much of the intended meaning of the passage is carried exclusively by the first 100 MFUW. Then read the words in italics in the passages. These are the ones from the second 100 MFUW that were used in the passages. This shows how much of the meaning of the passage in question is carried by the second 100 MFUW. Finally, read the words in quotes. These are the ones from the third 100 MFUW. Here one can note the amount that the third 100 MFUW contribute to the meaningfulness of each passage. (Each of the following

passages were originally written as several paragraphs. For the sake of simplicity in display they are presented here each as a single paragraph.)

Grade 1, Level 6 passage (Fay, et al., 1972, pp. 85-86):

___ said. There, there, said ___. *Don't* be ___. You can *come back next* ___. ___ can I? ___ said. ___ "boy"! I can *get here* as "soon" as "school" is out. Then I can make a ___ more than ___! ___ "didn't" ___. She "knew" she would have a ___ of ___ on her *next* ___ at ___. Now she ___ to *get home* and *tell* ___ and ___ all about her ___. ___ in the little ___ and *looked* out. She was ___ that she was *going home* in ___ little ___.

Grade 2, Level 7 passage (pp. 125-126):

He ___ than "ever." He was not very ___, but he "knew" he could not ___. If he ___, the ___ would ___ him up. ___ he ___ on and one. He was ___. He was ___. His "feet" ___. But there was the ___ him, and he had to "keep" on ___. "Soon" the ___ *came* to his *old* ___. He ___ *right* up to the ___. The ___ "heard" the ___ and ___ out. He *saw* his ___, and he *saw* the ___. The ___ the ___ to the ___ and ___ very ___.

Grade 3, Level 9 passage (p. 153):

But one "night" after they made ___, ___ said, *Well*, we *don't* have "far" to *go* now. By ___ "night" we *should* be at ___. Two ___ there, and ___ be ___ to *get* ___ and "food." ___ "better" "let" the ___ and ___ for *a few* "days," *too*. ___ be a ___ "across" the ___. As "soon" as the ___, they ___ the ___ to the ___. When they ___ out, ___ said, ___, it ___ be *too* ___ now that ___ the ___. At ___ now we ___ have to ___ about ___.

Grade 4, Level 11 passage (p. 211):

There was now no ___ in my ___ that ___ was ___ — in its most ___ and ___. In the ___ I had ___. Now, ___ about, I was ___ to find him ___ in ___. At this ___ a *large* ___ of ___ from the ___, ___ "across" the ___, and ___ down the ___, ___ and ___ *off* a ___. The ___ that ___ a ___ from the ___. There I ___, or ___ his "feet," for they were the only *part* of him ___.

Grade 5, Level 2 passage (p. 226):

On a ___ the ___ of ___ could see the ___ *along* the ___. And the ___ on the ___ could see ___, the ___ on ___, and ___, at its "side" and a little ___, ___, where the ___ was ___. The *men* were ___ the ___ which ___ the ___. I ___ *go*! I ___ *go*! ___, and he ___ his ___ in the ___. He ___ that ___, his "father," *might* ___ about him. But he "knew" that would not be.

Grade 6, Level 13 passage (p. 225):

An ____ of "school" ____ to the ____: ____ *Mr.* ____! *I don't* see what ____ it is to this little ____ that he has *such* a "high" ____, ____ a ____ from ____, ____ A ____ "year" *old* "boy" ____: *I think*, in ____, I am "sure" that you can ____ "keep" your ____, *Mr.* ____ He ____ do one ____ of ____, and ____ would be ____ to see their first ____ "since" ____, ____ "boy" was ____ he had the ____: *I think* ____ of the ____ you *should* ____ him *back* to ____.

It is apparent from the appearance of the six basal reader passages presented here that the 100 MFUW their authors used in them contribute little to their overall meaningfulness. Thus, Hillerich's observation that more of the first 100 MFUW will appear in such passages than will those of the second or third 100 MFUW seems true – but beside the point, in terms of "returns" in comprehension for the reader. That is, while in certain instances an addition of the second and/or third 100 MFUW in these passages does provide for the meaning of a given sentence, the addition of these two segments of the MFUW does little to improve the readability of any of these passages as a whole.

In the light of this, it seems reasonable to question the appropriateness of the praise given by some as to the utility of the MFUW as aids to reading comprehension. For example, if the 300 MFUW contribute such a small part of the meaning a reader can gain from passages from graded basal readers, as is demonstrated here, should much valuable reading instruction time be spent on word games and drill with them? Then, with the limitations of the MFUW shown here in mind, surely it would be improper to measure a child's speed-of-reading ability by having him read the MFUW in isolation. Above all, the belief that the difficulty some children have in learning to read with comprehension can be attributed to their not being able to read the MFUW also becomes suspect. To the contrary of Jones' notion, that to be successful the beginning reader must first learn to recognize the first few hundred MFUW, one can suggest that other words besides these are the more important for the child to learn to recognize.

It appears, therefore, that these other words should take precedence over the MFUW as to which are taught in the early sequences of the reading program. In short, the present analysis of the six graded reading passages described here raises serious doubt that the large amounts of instructional time some teachers give to the 300 MFUW will result in the goal these teachers strive for – children well armed to read with comprehension. Conversely, one could say that instead of concentrating so much on the MFUW it may be better for the teacher to use the available instructional time to draw children's attention to the words in the basal reader that are at least beyond the 300 MFUW. The present study reinforces the generally known fact that it is these words, rather than the MFUW, which carry the bulk of the meaning found in such stories.

If this shift in instructional emphasis is to succeed, however, it is critical to suggest that two important teaching positions must prevail. One, the

teacher needs to develop good phonics skills in young pupils so that they are readily prepared to use letters as cues to the recognition of frequently appearing yet unknown words. One should stress that the use of phonics skills for this purpose will be done only when a pupil feels the need to recognize the MFUW.

This leads us to the second prerequisite needed here. The psycholinguistic approach to reading, as it has come to be called, should be adopted. Simply put, this means that the teacher should be concerned, above all, that pupils read sentences and passages to gain meanings the authors of such material intended, rather than to recognize the MFUW in oral reading activities. This approach assumes that to gain comprehension in reading pupils must depend on words beyond the 300 MFUW, at the very least. So, when teachers spend time directing pupils' attention to such words, rather than to the MFUW, they are conforming to a basic principle of this psycholinguistic method of teaching.

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