The Mythology of Reading: I--Sight Words

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It is significant to note that the teaching of "sight" words was *not* one of the "persistent questions on beginning reading" which a carefully-selected group of experts recently chose to discuss (1). Indeed, from what one knows of this topic it would have been surprising to find the notion that young children should be first taught words as "wholes" being given critical examination in any such discussion. This is because the validity of instruction in "sight" words is accepted without question by almost all of today's experts in reading instruction. That is, there is widespread support among them for Durkin's recommendation "that reading instruction begin with what is generally referred to as a *whole-word approach*. This simply means that entire words are taught at the start rather than, for example, letter sounds. Sometimes this approach is referred to as a 'sight method' because the expectation is that children will recognize words on sight rather than through a letter-by-letter analysis. And sometimes it is called a 'look-say method' because the assumption is that a child will look at a word and be able to say what it is without going through the more careful analysis" (3).

It is generally assumed, as well, that this "sight" word instruction should be continued on into the middle grades. For example, Smith and Barrett believe that one way words are "learned [is] through application of a variety of word identification skills" (8). But "additionally," they insist, "there are times when words are taught as sight words." These sight words are "potentially troublesome words," they go on, which do not "lend themselves to identification by means of other skills" (the above "variety of word identification skills"). These writers contend therefore, as does Durkin, that it is necessary for children to learn to recognize some words "without going through any types of analyses" (4). Accordingly, "most middle grades teachers will experience the need to teach some sight words nearly every day" (8).

Since almost all writers of reading methodology to the present agree with these conclusions, one would assume that reading whole words by "sight" would be a practice firmly supported by the experimental evidence as to how children first perceive words. Much to one's consternation, however, no such evidence is demanded by the

advocates of "sight" words. Rather, the values of "sight" words are thought by them as self-evident. Unfortunately for the teacher of reading, in passing along the descriptions of "sight" words in reading methods texts over the years these writers have failed to indicate these descriptions were based on hearsay, rumor or speculation. That is, on anything but an accurate reading of the matter, as this would be done from the published research.

For the research here as to how children recognize words, as Chall (2) was able to give due publicity, offers little corroboration to the supposition that the easiest, therefore most-used cue to word recognition by the beginning reader is an image of the contour, outline or configuration of a "whole" word. This template conception of word recognition, Chall noted, was discredited handily by the research up to the time of her intensive review in 1967.

An even more exhaustive critique of the research on word recognition since Chall's confirms her earlier conclusions (5). It has been demonstrated here that without exception the research on how young children perceive or identify words indicates "the shape of a word is the least-used cue to its recognition." After a reading of Gibson's report of her research on how children recognize letters one cannot be too astonished at this finding. Gibson explains that children do not recognize even a letter by its general configuration or shape (6). Taking Gibson's research as his guide, Frank Smith has described further that if children use the separate features of letters (whether a letter is open, intersected, horizontal, has symmetry) as cues to recognize letters, they hardly could recognize words as wholes, or by "sight." He asks of the problem, in a pertinent way: "If words are recognized 'as wholes,' how are the wholes recognized?" (7).

Quite apparently, this is a question the proponents of sight words over the years have failed to consider, for some undisclosed reason. By not facing up to the facts about sight words, *vis a vis* the research on word recognition, the writings on sight words have evolved into strange-appearing phenomena. The current descriptions of "sight" words are highly irregular, to say the least. For example, there are several unfounded claims made for "sight" words, e.g., they lengthen the reader's eye span or they are necessary to know before one teaches children to discriminate letters, or before phonics can be successfully learned. As expected, what a "sight" word is has numerous and often contradictory definitions, from one advocate to the next. Supposedly, they are "unphonetic," yet commonly-used, high-frequency words. How a word that does not conform to English phonology could be

commonly used is never explained, of course. These words are said to have high emotional content, in one opinion of them, and yet must only be free morphemes, or function words, in the views of other writers. There are many other, equally disconcerting remarks that surround the mysterious "sight" word.

In spite of the state of affairs of "sight" words briefly given here, it is not too late for writers to begin to reform what they have to say about this troubled proceeding. Nonetheless, to regain our confidence in the integrity of the advice given teachers as to teaching reading to beginning readers, the proponents of "sight" words must take a painful step. This is to ask themselves if what they have said about "sight" words does not in fact constitute wrongful advice—in light of the research. And thus, whether this advice has not led teachers into wasteful and ineffectual practices. If the present advocates of sight words believe that teachers are best served by advice based on research rather than rumor, they must inevitably come to this rejudgment of their opinions of "sight" words.

This change in attitude among the opinion-makers of reading instruction, while admittedly an unpleasant chore, will have bounteous effects. Among these will be the stimulation to teachers to help children take advantage of their inherent perceptual abilities by directing them to a more proficient use of letter cues to word recognition. The likelihood of attaining fluency in word recognition in children will be much more enhanced by this instruction than by instruction in "sight" words.

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