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 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 _ _ 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 ___ the ___ which ___ the ___. I ___! I ___! ___, ___ 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.

REFERENCES