

A Proposal for a Phonics-First Framework for the Diagnosis and Teaching of Educational Factors

Comparing the Typical Sight-Word-First Framework
(Configuration and Context Clues)
of Teaching Beginning Reading
with the Phonic-First Framework

In Regard to Their
Theories, Practices & Outcomes

[This is a work-in-progress that will be updated as from time to time.]

Prepared by Donald L. Potter
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Preface

The “Typical Scope and Sequence of Reading Skills” comes from Eldon E. Ekwall and James L. Shanker’s *Diagnosis and Remediation of the Disabled Reader*, 3rd Edition (Allyn and Bacon, 1976, 1983, 1988). I call this the “Standard Model for Teaching Reading” since it seems to drive instruction in most American classrooms. This is from Chapter 3, “A Framework for the Diagnosis and Teaching of Educational Factors.”

Notice that sight-words are an integral part of their understanding of the reading process. “Basic Sight Words” are taken from standard lists such as Dolch or Fry and memorized without reference to any phonics. “Other Sight Words” refers to words which become sight words through experience reading without specific attempts at memorization from lists.

My thesis is that a **faulty understanding of the reading process** leads to **faulty initial reading instruction**, which then creates **faulty student reading**, fueling the development of **faulty diagnostic procedures**, that further exacerbating the problem with **faulty remediation practices**.

Notice that “configurational clues” and “context clues” **precede** “phonetic analysis” in Ekwall and Shanker’s “Scope of The Reading Skills.” This “Standard Model of Reading Instruction” has been popular at least since Huey’s 1908 *Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading*. The combination of sight word instruction, configuration clues, and context clues is the leading cause artificially induced whole-word dyslexia (pseudo-dyslexia).

The Whole-Language theory of Frank Smith and Kenneth Goodman is in line with this model. It was this **defective model of reading** that informed much of the in-service instruction that I received during my 21 years in public education, billed variously as Whole-Language, Guided-Reading, Balanced-Literacy, Literature Driven Instruction, Psycholinguistic Approach, and in its remedial aspects, Reading Recovery, Leveled Literacy Intervention, etc.

This “Scope of Reading Skills” is the paradigm that has influenced the thinking and practice of classroom teachers and curriculum designers. Analyzing the kind of instruction that this paradigm inevitably creates will enable us to **envision a different paradigm** that will avoid the damaging effects of sight-word instruction on beginning reading students. In fact, this paradigm is older than the current one, being the leading theory since the invention of the alphabet.

Remember

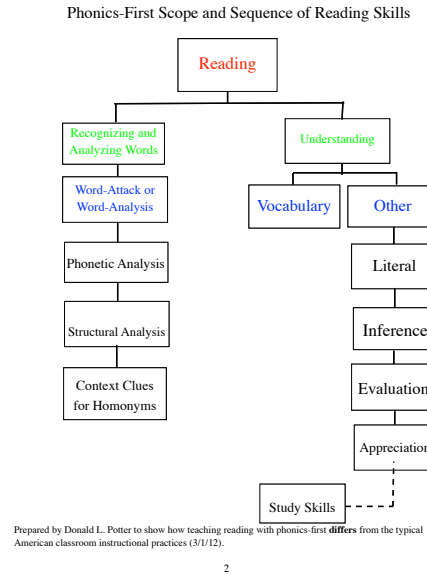
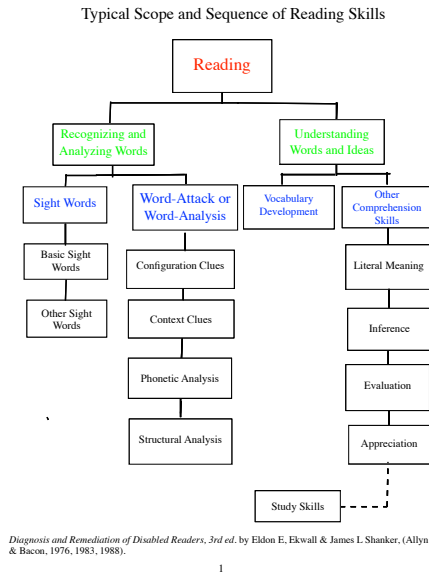
Different theories.
Different Procedures.
Different Outcomes.

Better Theories
Better teaching
Better outcomes.

On the next page are the two charts illustrating two paradigms of beginning reading instruction that we will discuss in the rest of this paper, by way of comparison and contrast, to see which is better. The charts are important because they allow us to see at-a-glance the significant differences and commonalities of each theory of reading. In terms of the *Reading Triangle*, Ekwall & Shanker’s Scope would be the Counter Clockwise Perceptual Path, producing Subjective Readers (guessers); whereas my Phonics-First instruction would represent the Clockwise Perceptual path producing Objective Readers.

Side by Side Comparison & Contrast

Ekwall & Shanker’s	Donald L. Potter’s
Typical Sight-Word First	Blend Phonics Phonics-First
Scope of Reading Skills	Scope of Reading Skills



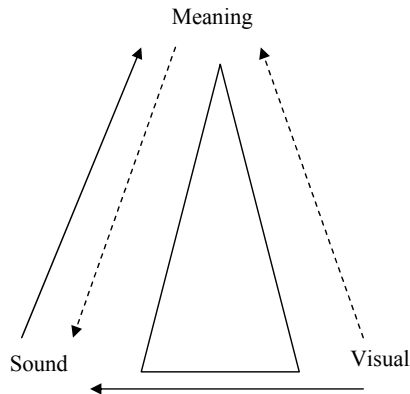
Notice carefully the *differences* and *similarities* of the two **Scope of Reading Skills** above. They both teach phonics, but Ekwall & Shanker (the typical reading program) place Sight-Word Identification prior to and in a separate section to be taught separately from phonics. Ekwall & Shanker also include Configuration and Context clues under Word-Attack or Word-Analysis, whereas Mr. Potter’s Phonics-First Framework reserves Context Clues for disentangling homonyms.

A comparison of the two charts reveals the radical differences between the two approaches to reading. Many people today claim to teach phonics, but it is in the sense that Ekwall & Shanker diagram here, they give Phonics a secondary and subsidiary role to Sight-Words, Configuration and Context clues. These differences have serious implications.

The implementation of these two paradigms produces two radically different types of readers based on the perceptual path the students have been trained to follow to identify words. **Objective Readers** read “from the sounds” represented by the print (the Code), whereas **Subjective Readers** read “from the meaning” of the words using configuration, context clues, and some phonics applied secondarily. See “Reading Triangle” on next page.

The Reading Triangle

Two Perceptual Routes to Meaning



1. **Clockwise** perceptual path: “Sound” approach to teaching reading. The Objective Route: “Visual” to “Sound” to “Meaning.” Two stops to “Meaning.”
2. **Counter clockwise** perceptual path: “Whole-word, sight-word, meaning” approach to teaching reading. The Subjective Route: “Visual” to “Meaning,” sound appearing as an afterthought. One stop to “Meaning.”

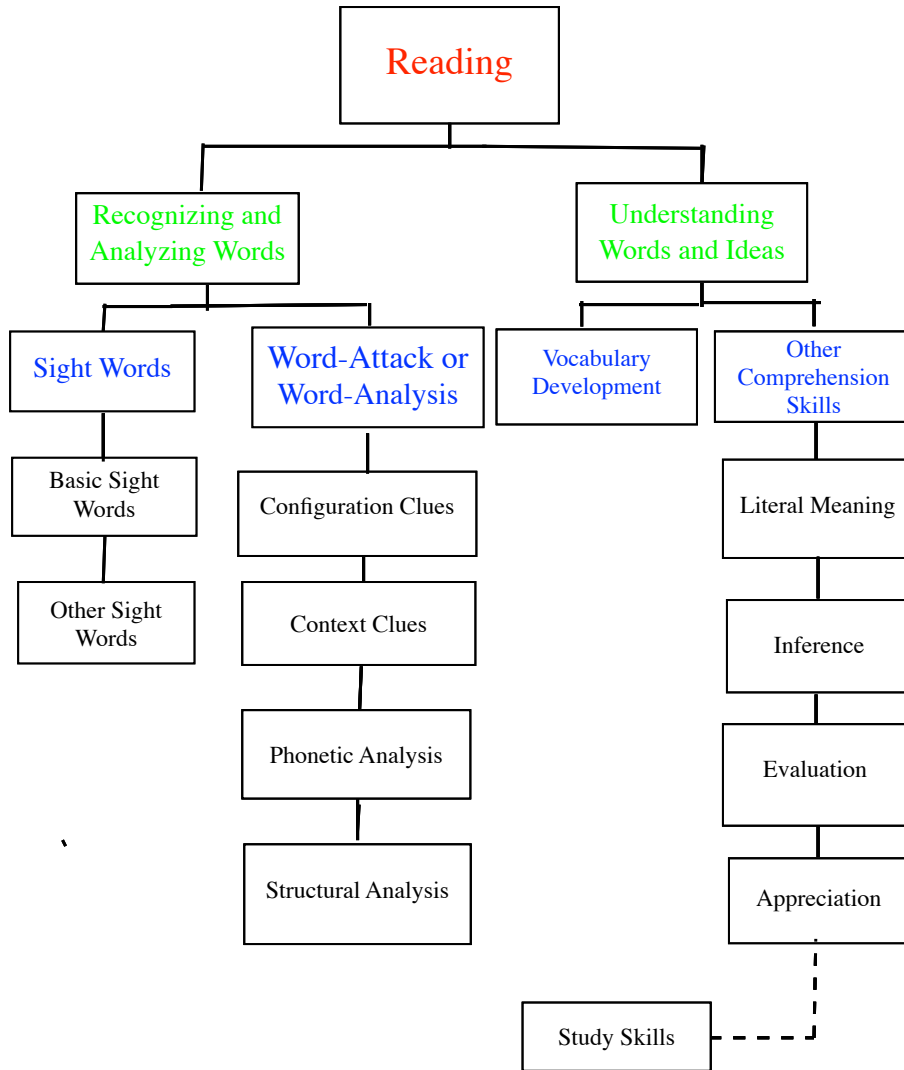
Early American Psychologist wrongly concluded that only one stop on such perceptual routes could be performed automatically, but that secondary stops had to be performed consciously. A form of this chart was published by Henry Suzzallo in 1913 in *The Cyclopedia of Education*, Volume 3.

This is a *conflict diagram* because a student trying to read from the “Meaning” and from the “Sound” **at the same time** will experience a conflict.

Note: The path between the “Visual” and “Sound” is shorter, but the path from “Visual” to “Sound” to “Meaning” requires two stops. The “Visual” to “Meaning” path only requires one stop, but students reading “from meaning” can not get to the “sound” until they first get the “Meaning.” To go directly (one stop) from the “Visual” to the “Meaning” always requires an element of **guessing**. Guessing is built into the “Meaning” method of teaching reading. The perceptual routes are established by initial reading instruction: “from the Sounds” or “from the Meaning.” They are difficult to change once established.

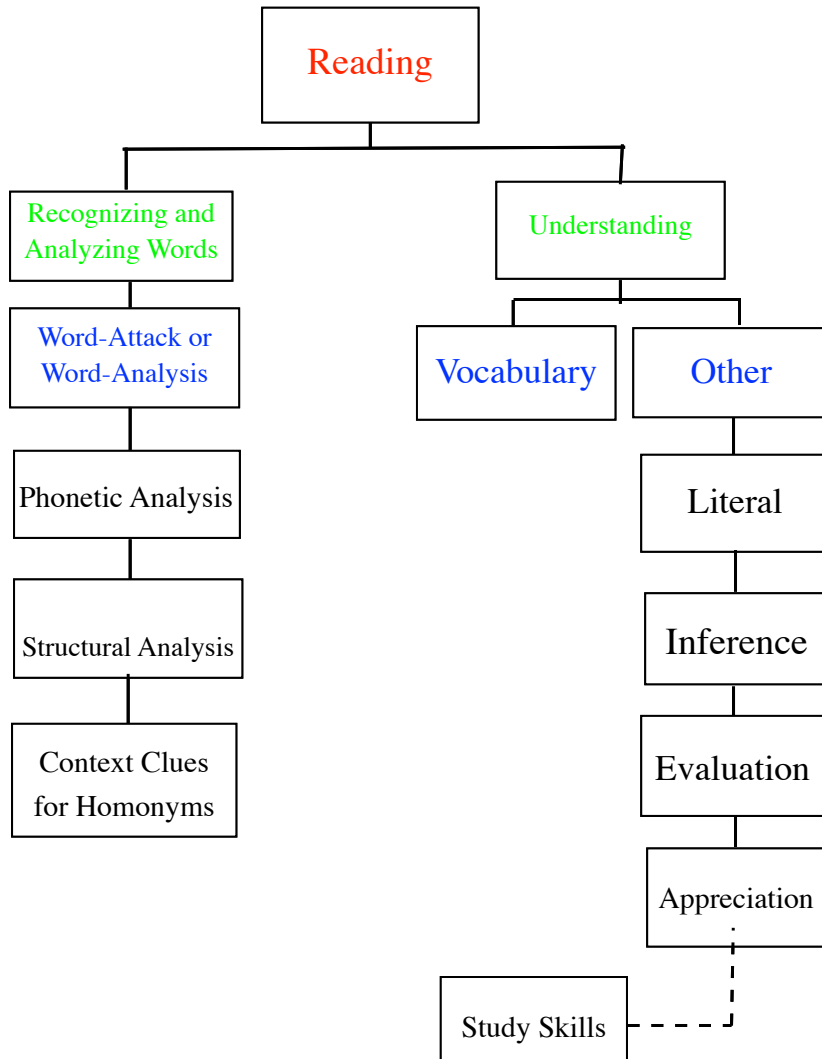
The two different approaches lead to two **different** and **opposite** perceptual types: “Objective” readers who read accurately “from the sound” and “subjective” readers who read inaccurately “from the meaning.”

Typical Scope and Sequence of Reading Skills



Diagnosis and Remediation of Disabled Readers, 3rd ed. by Eldon E. Ekwall & James L. Shanker, (Allyn & Bacon, 1976, 1983, 1988).

Phonics-First Scope and Sequence of Reading Skills



Prepared by Donald L. Potter to show how teaching reading with phonics-first **differs** from the typical American classroom instructional practices (3/1/12).

I. The Dolch Basic Sight Vocabulary: Alphabetical Order

a about after again all always am an and any are around as ask at ate away be

because been before best better big black blue both bring brown but buy by

call came can carry clean cold come could cut

did do does done don't down draw drink

eat eight every

fall far fast find first five fly for found four from full funny

gave get give go goes going good got green grow

had has have he help her here him his hold hot how hurt

I if in into is it its

jump just

keep kind know

laugh let light like little live long look

made make many may me much must my myself

never new no not now

of off old on once one only open or our out over own

pick play please pretty pull put

ran read red ride right round run

said saw say see seven shall she show sing sit six sleep small so some soon start stop

take tell ten thank that the their them then there these they think this those three to today together
too try two

under up upon us use

very

walk want warm was wash we well went were what when where which white who why will wish
with work would write

yellow yes you your

II. The Dolch Basic Sight Vocabulary: Grammatical Categories

Conjunctions: and as because but if or

Prepositions: about after at by down for from in into of on over to
under upon

Pronouns: he her him his I it its me my myself our she that them these
they this those us we what which who you your

Adverbs: again always around away before far fast first here how just
much never no not now off once only out so soon then there today
together too up very well when where why yes.

Adjectives: a all an any best better big black blue both brown clean
cold eight every five four full funny good green hot kind light little long
many new old one own pretty red right round seven six small some ten
the three two warm white yellow

Verbs: *am are ask ate be been bring buy call came can carry come
could cut did do does done don't draw drink eat fall find fly found gave
get give go goes going got grow had has have help hold hurt is jump
keep know laugh let like live look made make may must open pick play
please pull put ran read ride run said saw say see shall show sing sit
sleep start stop take tell thank think try use walk want was wash went
were will wish work would write*

Note: Verbs can be classified as Full Verbs, *Modal Verbs* and *Auxiliary Verbs*. Modals and Auxiliaries are “function words.”

*A Basic Sight Vocabulary of 220 Word, Comprising All Words, Except Nouns Common to the Word List of International Kindergarten Union, The Gates List, and Wheeler Howell List*¹

¹Edward W. Dolch, “A Basic Sight Vocabulary,” *The Elementary School Journal*, Vol. 36, No. 6 (February, 1936), pp. 456-60.

III. The Dolch Basic Sight Vocabulary: Grade Level in Order of Frequency

Pre-Primer: the to and a I you it in said for up look is go we little down can see not one my me big come blue red where jump away here help make yellow two play run find three funny

Primer: he was that she on they but at with all there out be have am do did what so get like this will yes went are now no came ride into good want too pretty four saw well ran brown eat who new must black white soon our ate say under please

First Grade: of his had him her some as then could when where them ask an over just from any how know put take every old by after think let going walk again may stop fly round give once open has live thank

Second Grade: would very your its around don't right green their call sleep five wash or before been off cold tell work first does goes write always made gave us buy those use fast pull both sit which read why found because best upon these sing wish many

Third Grade: if long about six never got seven eight today myself much keep try start ten bring drink only better hold warm full done light pick hurt cut kind fall carry small own show hot far draw clean grow together shall laugh

Dolch Nouns (95 words)

apple, baby, back, ball, bear, bed, bell, bird, birthday, boat, box, boy, bread, brother, cake, car, cat, chair, chicken, children, Christmas, coat, corn, cow, day, dog, doll, door, duck, egg, eye, farm, farmer, father, feet, fire, fish, floor, flower, game, garden, girl, good-bye, grass, ground, hand, head, hill, home, horse, house, kitty, leg, letter, man, men, milk, money, morning, mother, name, nest, night, paper, party, picture, pig, rabbit, rain, ring, robin, Santa Claus, school, seed, sheep, shoe, sister, snow, song, squirrel, stick, street, sun, table, thing, time, top, toy, tree, watch, water, way, wind, window, wood

The Dolch Nouns are included in this study for convenience. They rarely, as far as I know, enter into discussions about sight-words. Most discussion centers on the 220 Service Words.

IV. Dangers of teaching sight words (whole words) first without Phonics: Illustrated and Explained.

The following information was taken from Raymond Laurita's foundational article: "Basic Sight Vocabulary: A Help or a Hindrance." (Spelling Progress Bulletin, Summer, 1966).

Raymond Laurita asks, "What is the difference between **was, saw, can, sun** or **is, it, an, on, no, me, we**, to a child who isn't cognizant of the nuances of the letters composing the language and who is responding primarily to word configuration?" Laurita correctly predicts, "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."

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 confusing.

is-in-on-on-an-or	come-came-can
at-to-it-if-of-off	is-as-am-a-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-went-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
there-where-were	so-soon
these-those-this-that	for-from-of

Table II

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

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

“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. ...Once confused perceptual pattern becomes established, it becomes the child's habitual response pattern for printed symbols unless replaced by 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.”

Note from Don Potter: Laurita's work on the psychology of teaching sight-words is one of the first, and one of the best studies of the subject ever done. I have published several essays by Mr. Laurita on my website, www.donpotter.net

Fundamental Premise: When you teach a sound-association system (alphabet system) as if it were a sight-association system (hieroglyphic system), you create associational confusion (reading disability). After Samuel L. Blumenfeld.

Diane McGuinness on Sight Words

“Sight words were originally defined as words which such irregular spellings that they had to be memorized “by sight.” Later memorizing *all* words by sight became the major mode of learning to read, especially “look-say.” Phonics programs and most reading textbooks also advocate teaching a large group of “sight words.” Here, the rational shifts to the “getting started” theory. Children should learn sight words, it is claimed, because they can start reading “right away,” and this is motivating. Thus, sight words are taught prior to learning the alphabet code or concurrently with learning the code. *Teaching sight words this way can have profoundly negative consequences on the child's fragile understanding of the alphabet principle.*” (*Why Our Children Can't Read*, McGuinness, 268)

“Teachers all over the world teach “sight words” based on lists like this one. This is very scary, because if authors of textbooks don't know the code, then teachers can't learn the code, and if teachers don't know the code, then the children can't learn the code. If children can't learn the code, the child can't learn to read or spell.” (*Why Our Children Can't Read*, McGuinness, 262f)

“Most reading programs produced by major publishing houses include a large list of sight words, many using “regular” spellings. It is a bad idea to teach sight words to children learning *any* language system. But there is more at stake. Teaching whole words by sight promotes a faulty decoding strategy. This happens because memorizing whole words seems logical and is relatively easy initially, leading to a false sense of security. But a whole-word strategy will inevitably collapse, depending on the child’s vocabulary and visual-memory skills. Meanwhile, this strategy can harden into a habit that can be difficult to break.” (Diane McGuinness, *Early Reading Instruction*, 57, 58).

“On the other hand, we know that time spent memorizing sight words can cause a negative outcome by promoting a strategy of “whole word guessing.” This is where children decode the first letter phonemically and guess the rest of the word based on its length and shape. This strategy is highly predictive of reading failure. It is well known that programs that emphasize (sight word, context-based guessing, part-word analysis, phonemic decoding) strongly affect the child’s decoding strategy, and that this strategy quickly becomes entrenched.” (Diane McGuinness, *Early Reading Instruction*, 114, 115)

“Boronat and Logan (1997) showed convincingly that what you pay attention to is automatically encoded by the brain and automatically cued in memory. As they put it, “What one pays attention to acts as a retrieval cue that draws associations out of memory.” what you ignore, even though it is physically adjacent to what you are looking at, is not encoded at all. The more a child focuses on the wrong patterns and combinations of letter sequences in words, the more automatic (habitual) it becomes.” (Diane McGuinness, *Early Reading Instruction*, 115)

In the Observational studies, time spent memorizing sight words was negatively and weakly correlated with reading scores for the kindergartners, but was negatively and strongly correlated for the older children (6 to 8 years). A sight-word strategy begins to overload between 7 and 8 years. I found that children who adopt a whole-word strategy by the end of first grade had not improved their performance when they were followed up in third grade. These children often made the same decoding errors in the same words that they had made two years earlier, and they were uniformly the worst readers in the class. (Diane McGuinness, *Early Reading Instruction*, 115)

In chapter 12, McGuinness deals with a recent theory that children learn to read in stages, the last of which is the “late-stage” sight-word reading. She gives convincing information that this is not correct. Her research indicates that Cattell’s reaction-time research was flawed because it did not take into consideration Parallel Distributed Processing and the fact that reaction-time studies are not precise enough to make inference of mental processes feasible. I suggest a careful study of her valuable discussion here. I was confused for quite some time by Shawitz and Ehri’s puzzling claims that all words eventually become “sight-words.” This has confused a lot of people. See Stephen Parker’s helpful discussion of Type 1 and Type 2 sight-words later in this paper.

Stanisals Dehaene: Cutting Edge Research

Stanisals Dehaene represents cutting-edge, cognitive research into reading when he recently wrote, “In summary, there is no longer any reason to doubt that global contours of words play virtually no role in reading. We do not recognize a printed word through a holistic grasp of its contour, but because our brain breaks it down into letters and graphemes. This fast and parallel processing probably explains why well-known and respected psychologists once propounded theories of global or “syncretic” reading. Today, we know that the immediacy of reading is just an illusion engendered by the extreme automaticity of its component stages, which operate outside our conscious awareness.” (*Reading in the Brain*, p. 225f.)

Observations on Sight Words
From Wiley Blevins, *Phonics from A to Z*,
Scholastic, NY, 1998. p. 97

Only 13 words (**a, and, for, he is, in, it, of, that, the, to, was, you**) account for more than 25% of the words in print. Although the Dolch Basic Sight Vocabulary was generated more than 40 years ago (1936), these words account for more than 50% of the words found in textbooks today (Johns, 1980).

Knowledge of high-frequency words is necessary for fluent reading. Although many high-frequency words carry little meaning, they affect the flow and coherence of text. Many of these words are considered “irregular” because they stray from the commonly taught sound-spelling relationships. Research shows that readers store these “irregular” words (Gough and Walsh, 1991; Treiman and Baron, 1981; Lovett, 1987) in their lexical memory the same way they store so-called regular words. That is, readers have to pay attention to each letter and the pattern of letters in a word and associate these with the sounds they represent (Ehri, 1992) Therefore, instruction should focus attention on each letter and/or letter pattern.

However, children don’t learn “irregular” words as easily or as quickly as they do “regular” words. Early readers commonly confuse the high-frequency words *of, for, and from*; the reversible words *on/no* and *was/saw*; and words with *th* and *w* such as *there, them, what, were, their, then, what, where, this, these, went, will, that, this, when, and with* (Cunningham, 1995). Therefore, children need to be taught irregular words with explicit instruction.

Observation on Blevins: The designation of words as regular and irregular is relative, rather than absolute. There are several popular lists of sight words, and no two lists are alike. The degree of irregularity depends on the phonetic system being used for comparison. Don Potter

Geraldine Rodgers on the High Frequency Word Effect

Nevertheless, very few high-frequency words do account for so very much of running text: about 300 covering 75%, 1,000 covering 90%, and 3,000 to 9,000 covering 98%. The rest of those half million words in English only turn up in the remaining 2% of running text. Yet, even with such enormously limited ability as the recognition of only 300 or so of the commonest words, it is possible to read at least 75% of most texts. If such a “crippled reader” is intelligent, perhaps 90% of such texts can be read accurately by context-guessing from the initial consonant sounds of the unknown words (phony phonics in action!), and 90% accuracy is above frustration level. (75)

The high-frequency-word effect, which is the fact that the greatest part of any selection is expressed by a very small number of words, is the thing that made the deaf-mute method possible in the first place. The deaf-mute-method could never have been possible except for that high-frequency-word effect. (75)

Yet the lowest-frequency words are the kernels of real thought, even though they compose only about two per-cent of almost any running page of print. It is only those lowest-frequency words that all but the simplest thoughts are transferred. Since functional illiterates lack the ability to sound out those low-frequency words and therefore to learn them, they are reported to have appallingly low “reading comprehension.” What they really suffer from, of course, is not low “reading comprehension” but true illiteracy, since the term illiteracy really means the inability to derive spoken language from printed letters. Therefore, the term, “functional illiteracy” is simply a pompous mask fashioned to hide what is really true illiteracy. (77)

These quotes are from *The Hidden Story*. I believe the high-frequency word effect explains how that children who learn to read from the meaning of the words instead of the sounds of the letters are inaccurate guessers, but readers, nevertheless, who often can do amazing feats of answering comprehension questions in the face of more than a sprinkling of misread words.

Miss Rogers quotes Dr. Hilda Mosse as saying, “Reading disorders can be caused by an inability to go from the necessary conditioned reflexes or by establishing and practicing the wrong reflexes.” Miss Rogers continues, “Experienced and dedicated teachers who limit oral reading of their children to reading groups, using basal readers with their controlled vocabularies, and who then limit their reading tests to silent reading comprehension tests are often completely unaware of how they serve reading disabilities right in their own classrooms. It is asking too much of human nature to ask such teachers who have been using these sight-word basal readers for years, with the honest conviction that they were teaching little children to read, to recognize that they have been doing something wrong all their professional lives. But such teachers are assured by something called ‘reading levels’, by which a child is supposed to know successively his handful of first-grade words and then a few more second-grade words and then third-grade words, ad nauseum, and his reading books only use the few words he has learned. The reality is that outside the never-never land of ‘reading experts’ who invented ‘controlled vocabularies’, there is no such thing as a third-grade word, as a simple reading of the Mother Goose rhymes demonstrates.” (*The Case for the Prosecution*)

The Miller Word Identification Assessment is the best way to determine if a student is an Objective or Subjective Reader. It is available at www.donpotter.net and www.blendphonics.net.

Stephen Parker on Sight Words

The following is taken from Stephen Parker's fine discussion in his 2017 excellent book, *Reading Instruction and Phonics* (28f).

The last vocabulary term I'll cover here is **sight word**. This will take more effort to explain than the previous terms because it is a much-misunderstood concept. A sight word is one that a reader instantly and automatically identifies without conscious effort. She doesn't analyze it, decode it, or sound it out. Rather, as soon as she sees the word, its sound and meaning are immediately available to her. If, instead, she first hears the word, its spelling and meaning are immediately available; and if she first thinks it, spelling and sound follow just as rapidly. For mature readers, most words are sight words.

Our brains, however, can store two distinctly different types of sight words – I'll call them **Type 1** and **Type 2**.

We create a **Type 1** sight word by linking the overall visual appearance (or shape) of the word directly to its meaning, without regard to the sound value of the letters that compose it. Examples are CHOIR, \$, %, and 24. There is no possibility of "sounding out" any of these symbolic representations of sound. Yet, as soon as we see them, what we "hear" in our brains is: KWIRE, DOLLAR, PERCENT, and TWENTY-FOUR.

We create a **Type 2** sight word by deliberate sound analysis: segmenting a written word into its individual graphemes, linking those graphemes with corresponding phonemes, and then blending those phonemes together to recognize the word.

The creation of a **Type 1** sight word depends upon the rather arduous process of rote memorization. The creation of a **Type 2** sight word depends upon successfully decoding that word, on the grapheme-phoneme level, 3-5 times, after which it becomes a sight word automatically.

As an example, consider the case of two hypothetical beginners, Danny and Tana, each trying to read what is for them a new word: SHEEP.

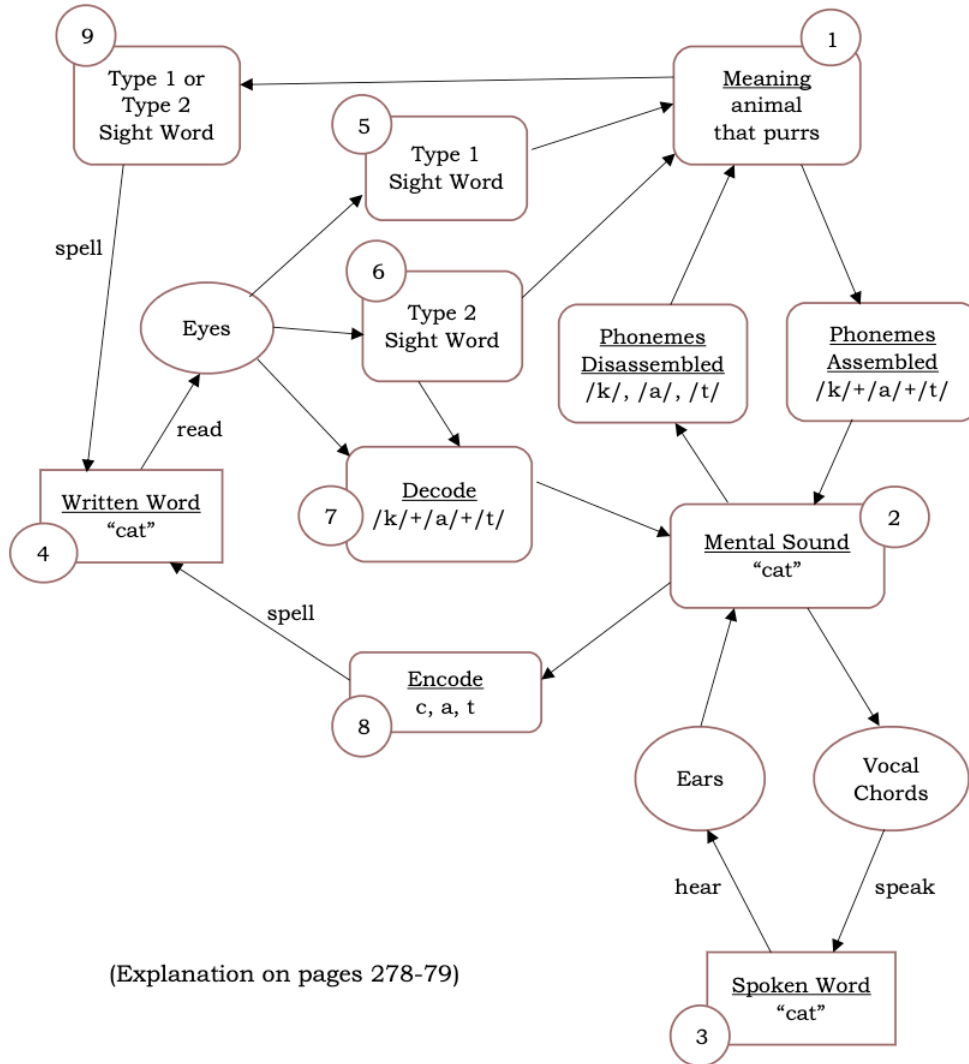
Danny has not been taught the sound value of letters. Nonetheless, the teacher says s-h-e-e-p means SHEEP, so Danny takes the teacher's word. He consciously attempts to commit the five letters to memory. Since he has not been taught any phoneme-grapheme correspondences, one letter is as good as another. For Danny, there's no reason that SHEEP couldn't be spelled "c-d-a-a-k" or "x-e-q-q-m." This, I think you'll agree, is a tedious way to memorize things; it's akin to memorizing phone numbers or passwords. Clearly it can be done, but how many words is a child capable of learning and remembering in such a manner? For Danny, SHEEP is stored in his brain as a **Type 1** sight word.

Tana, who is learning Synthetic Phonics, has an enormous advantage over Danny. She analyzes the unknown word, SHEEP, and accurately segments it into its 3 graphemes: SH, EE, and P. Then, using her knowledge of the code, she matches each of these graphemes with a corresponding phoneme: /sh/, /ē/, and /p/. Finally, blending the 3 phonemes together, she recognizes the resulting word: a fluffy animal that provides us with wool. After she decodes the word just a few more times, SHEEP automatically becomes a sight word for Tana, *without her ever deliberately trying to memorize it*. The word becomes part of a personal lexicon in Tana's brain reserved for words whose sound, meaning, and now spelling, are fully and accurately fused, and bonded as a unit. Because this word has been segmented *down to its phonemic level*, with all phonemes and graphemes correctly matched, it is *automatically* handled by the brain's powerful Language Center. For Tana, SHEEP is stored in her brain as a **Type 2 sight word**, fully connected to sound.

We can master 50,000 sight words because nearly all of them are **Type 2** sight words: words that have been explicitly analyzed *at the grapheme-phoneme level*, with all graphemes and phonemes appropriately matched. This is precisely what distinguishes **Type 2** from **Type 1** sight words. If we were in Danny's predicament, we would be stuck in functionally illiteracy with, at best a thousand sight words. The fact that we know 50,000 sight words means that we acquired most of them by deliberate phonetic analysis, as exemplified by Tana. The misunderstanding of sight word formation – specifically the difference between **Type 1** and **Type 2** sight words – predates whole languages, and continues in balanced literacy today. (58, 60) (Pace Linnea C. Ehri in Internet Resource Page of this document.)

Appendix Z

Read, Spell, Hear, Speak



(Explanation on pages 278-79)

The above schematic was taken from the first edition of Stephen Parker's *Reading Instruction and Phonics: Theory and Practice for Teachers*, 2018. His "Explanation" is on the next two pages.

Explanation

Speaking and listening are innate for us due to a gift of evolution: the Language Center in our brains. In the accompanying schematic, the brain's Language Center is represented by box 1 and 2 and the boxes between them. Thanks to this part of the brain, a toddler, without the benefit of formal instruction, will start speaking and comprehending the speech of others. The child need only be surrounded by other speakers. Phoneme assembly and disassembly are handled automatically and unconsciously by the brain.

For every word a toddler understands (like CAT), hearing it immediately connects to meaning: "animal that purrs." This corresponds to the sequence 321 in the chart. Once box 2 lights up, box 1 follows within a few milliseconds (thousandths of a second). Conversely, if box 1 lights up first (the child sees a cat), box 2, with the correct coarticulated sound immediately follows and the child says "cat." In this case, the sequence is 123.

There's no comparable Reading/Spelling Center in the brain. Skilled reading and spelling, if they are to occur, must take advantage of this Language Center. It's possible for a *printed* word to enter the Language Center at box 1. That's what occurs with a Type 1 sight word—a word whose meaning is rote-memorized without regard to the sound value of its letters. How to pronounce the word *follows* recognition of its meaning. The path is 45123.

For a printed word to enter the Language Center at box 2, the word must first be converted to sound because this box accepts only coarticulated phonemes. This requires that the printed word be decoded, that is, individual phonemes suggested by the word's spelling (graphemes) must be blended together. Essentially, the brain must be shown *how* to accept visual input (letters) as sound. In this case, *meaning follows sound* and the route is 4721.

Both routes for getting print into the Language Center can be used, and both have some obvious disadvantages. Learning Type 1 sight words is difficult grunt work that is not based on logic. Further, there is an upper limit on the number of words that can be mastered in this way: a few thousand, based on the experience of the Chinese and their ideograms. Decoding, on the other hand, requires specific grapheme-phoneme instruction and, at least at first, the reading is slow and labored.

But here's the key. The disadvantages of learning Type 1 sight words never go away. The task forever remains non-rational and it will never lead to the 50,000 sight words necessary to become a competent reader on the college level. Decoding, however, while slow at first, quickly picks up pace. More importantly, traveling the 4721 path a couple times with a given word *automatically* transforms it into a Type 2 sight word: a word that enters the Language Center at box 1 and at box 2. But even more importantly, the number of Type 2 sight words that the brain can handle has no obvious upper limit. Type 2 sight words are easy to remember precisely because the sound route always backs them up and provides a mnemonic aid. When the reader's eyes focus on a Type 2 sight word, two paths to meaning light up *instantaneously* and *concurrently*: 61 and 6721.

Different skills use different paths

1. Speaking: 123 (requires assembly and coarticulation of phonemes).
2. Listening: 321 (requires disassembly of coarticulated phonemes in order to match sound with meaning).
3. A toddler repeating sounds without understanding them: 323.
4. Reading Type 1 sight words: 451. This is the only path possible for a reader having little or no knowledge of phonics.
5. A beginning synthetic phonics student reading silently: 4721.
6. A beginning synthetic phonics student reading aloud: 472(1)3. Include (1) if the knows the word's meaning. Exclude (1) if the word is a nonsense word like GLORP.
7. Reading Type 2 sight words: 461 and 46721. Both routes happen concurrently and mutually support each other for a skilled reader. For any given word, the 4721 route, traveled a few times, creates a Type 2 sight word.
8. A skilled reader, reading silently: combination of 451 and 461, mostly the latter.
9. A skilled reader, reading aloud: combination of 45123 and 46123, mostly the latter.
10. A skilled reader, faced with a challenge like OTORHINOLARYNGOLOGY: 4721 and, perhaps, a dictionary.
11. A beginning phonics student, spelling dictated words: 3284. This involves both phonemic awareness and the ability to match graphemes with phonemes detected in the pronunciation.
12. A beginner, with little to no phonics, trying to spell: 32194 if the word happens to be a Type 1 sight word - if not, the student is out of luck.
13. A beginning synthetic phonics writer: 1284 with occasional 194.
14. A skilled synthetic phonics writer: 194. Occasionally 1284 (when faced with a spelling challenge like PHARMACEUTICAL).

Notes from Bruce Murry's *Making sight Word:*

Teaching Word Recognition from Phoneme Awareness to Fluency

How to help children read effortlessly without memorization

METHOD OR PROCESS?

The term *sight word* is typically used ambiguously as either a method or a process. A sight-word *method* means learning words by rote, i.e., by mechanical repetition without real understanding. With the exception of a few common, irregular words like *to* and *of* found in even the simplest text, beginners don't need drill and memorization methods to learn sight words because such methods are notoriously inefficient and unreliable. On the other hand, every reader needs a vast store of words that can be recognized instantly and effortlessly. Nearly all of our sight words are learned by a sight-word *process*. The process of making sight words by understanding alphabetic mappings is the topic of this book.

<https://archive.org/details/makingsightwords0000murr/mode/2up?view=theater>

THE QUESTION OF RETENTION

If phoneme awareness can make or break a child's success in learning to read, what do we do about a child who completes kindergarten with no ability to detect phonemes? Do we send that child on to first grade anyway, or do we hold him back for another year in kindergarten? We know children need phoneme awareness to make sense of the alphabetic code and succeed in learning to read.

If we send a child to first grade without phoneme awareness, we may be setting him up for failure by placing him where he lacks the skills to succeed. Stanovich's (1986) theory of Matthew effects shows how early reading failure can pervade everything. A disastrous experience in first-grade reading may dispose a child to an educational setback with lifelong consequences.

On the other hand, retention is certainly no foolproof solution. Phoneme awareness does not simply mature; **it must be taught**. If the kindergarten teacher had no effect during a year of instruction, putting the child back for a second year with the same teacher will likely get the same result. An excellent first-grade teacher who reviews phonemes thoroughly in an explicit phonics program seems a better bet for a breakthrough into decoding. Thus, the crucial question is where PA will be taught. If a gifted kindergarten teacher has an effective phoneme-direct teaching program, retention might be the best shot at reversing powerful negative Matthew effects. However, a strong first-grade teacher whose instruction features PA review, explicit phonics, and decodable text might be preferable. As Stanovich (1986) emphasizes, what is needed is a "surgical strike" at the root of the problem, and the root of the problem is learning to detect the phonemes that will be mapped in alphabetic writing. [I often tell teachers that if their child's kindergarten or first grade teacher taught *Blend Phonics* or my *Natural Phonics Primer: A Universal Safety Net for Literacy*, with the *Phonovisual Charts*, I would not be tutoring their child.]

I. A. Beck on Sight Word

From *Making Sense of Phonics* (2nd Ed.)

Sight Words: Sight words is the label given to some high-frequency words that are taught as whole words to be memorized, purportedly because they cannot be sounded out. Additionally, high-frequency words include function words (e.g., *a, my, the, to, like, he, come, get, let, this*)*, are included because they are necessary to develop stories. Sight words and the way to teach the became institutionalized by Edward Dolch (1948) who first published a list of the 220 most frequently used words in children's books. For those of our readers who are not primary-grade teachers, we think it would be hard for you to imagine the extent to which the Dolch words and the way to teach them have become institutionalized. (144)

*Some sight words can be sounded out and thus could be taught through phonics instruction, but they may have been included as sight words because they were needed to construct connected before the graphemes were taught.

Presently, the "sight word" label has begun to appear in the cognitive psychology literature. But the use of it in such literature has nothing to do with methods of teaching beginning word recognition or how certain high-frequency irregular words are taught. Rather, the present use of the term sight word in the research literature describes a major property of competent reading. It refers to how competent readers read words. They do so by sight; they recognize them instant, automatically. (144)

Note from Internet Publisher: Donald L. Potter

June 6, 2012, Odessa, TX

Ever since reading Eldon E. Ekwall and James L. Shanker's *Diagnosis and Remediation of the Disabled Reader*, 3rd Edition several years ago, I have wanted to publish a paper comparing their "Scope and Sequence" with Hazel Loring's "Scope and Sequence."

I saw immediately that there was a vast difference between the two, and I felt sure that the difference made a huge difference in students' levels of reading achievement.

Let me say that there is a lot of excellent information in Ekwall & Shanker's book. They have some very fine assessment material. But in following the standard practice of considering sight-words, configuration clues, and context clues as a major part of beginning reading instruction, they take, I believe, the wrong path: a path fraught with negative consequences for beginning reading instruction, diagnosis of reading problems, and the prescription for remedial measures.

The authors discuss "Competencies that Student Should Achieve in Their Progression Through the Grades." It is to be noted that students are expected to know half the Dolch List 220 Sight Words by the middle of second-grade and the remaining 110 words by the middle of third grade. I recall being surprised by Edward Fry's statement that it takes about three years for a student to learn the first 300 of his Instant Words. Compare these dismally low projections with the competencies of a *Blend Phonics* student who will have been taught to decode 1,974 words, including all 220 Dolch List Sight Words! There is absolutely no reason to teach any of the 220 Dolch List Sight Words with whole word memorization.

Professor William McMahon stated my position perfectly way back in 1965,

My point is this: The fact of the matter is that the child who is suffering from "severe reading disability" has not failed to learn. On the contrary, he has learned exactly what he has been taught and he has become a reading cripple as a consequence." He called this guessing habit, the "McMahon Syndrome."

The outcome of accepting the Phonics-First Framework in the area of diagnosis and remediation would be to follow Rudolf Flesch's, largely unheeded 1955 recommendation: "to isolate students from their whole-word guessing environment and doing only phonics exercises until the guessing habit was largely cured." This is my recommendation and practice. It has proven effective for me and my tutoring students.

www.donpotter.net

www.blendphonics.org

This document was last updated on September 7, 2012, September 18, 2015, Feb. 16, 2016, and Feb. 7, 2017, July 21, 2017. Information on the two types of sight words from Stephen Parker were added on June 30, 2018. Further updates on June 24, 2019 and October 29, 2020, March 27, 2023.

Rudolf Flesch's Penetrating Insights Into the Perverse Psychology of the Whole Word Method

"The word method is one of the purest forms
of conditioned reflex psychology
that has ever been invented."

Rudolf Flesch – 1955

I wish educators were frank about this thing and admitted that the word method is a simple application of the conditioned reflex. It goes straight back to Pavlov and his famous salivating dogs. You remember what Pavlov did, don't you? He rang a bell whenever he put meat in front of the dog. The dog salivated whenever he saw meat. So he got used to salivating whenever he heard a bell. Whereupon Pavlov played his dirty trick on the poor animal and rang the bell *without* giving him any meat. And the dog salivated in vain. Pavlov had given him a useless unnatural, totally meaningless conditioned reflex.

It was not long before the conditioned-reflex psychologists – the "associationists" or "connectionist" school – found out that Pavlov's discovery could be used to train human beings. Expose him repeatedly to an association of certain things or events, and sooner or later he will automatically connect them in his mind. *Of course*, you can teach a child to read that way – nothing easier than that. You show him the word *chicken* seventeen times in succession, each time in connection with a picture of a chicken and an explanation by the teacher that this combination of letters means a chicken. And so with every other word.

Don't you see how degrading this whole process is? The child is never told *why* this heap of letters means "chicken," and not "giraffe," or "kangaroo," or "recess period." Don't you know the main question in all children's minds is the question *why*? Maybe the child would like to know *why chicken* means a chicken, maybe he doesn't ask the question simply because he feels he won't get an answer. It's "chicken" because Teacher says so. Conditioning is an authoritarian process.

It seems to me a plain fact that the word method consists essentially of treating children as if they were dogs. It is not a method of teaching at all; it is clearly a method of animal training. It's the most inhuman, mean, stupid way of fostering something on a child's mind. ... conditioned-reflexers are authoritarians.

Why Johnny Can't Read and what you can do about it. Rudolf Flesch (1955), pages 125f.

Links to Research Documents

Raymond E. Laurita

http://donpotter.net/pdf/laurita_critical_exam.pdf

<http://donpotter.net/pdf/laurita-basic-sight-vocabul.pdf>

<http://donpotter.net/pdf/laurita-basic-sight-vocabul.pdf>

<http://donpotter.net/pdf/errors-children-make-laurit.pdf>

Samuel L. Blumenfeld

<http://donpotter.net/pdf/miller-blumenfeld-dyslexia-.pdf>

<http://www.donpotter.net/pdf/miscue-analysis.pdf>

<http://www.donpotter.net/pdf/dyslexia-school-disease.pdf>

http://donpotter.net/pdf/creating_dyslexia_blumenfel.pdf

<http://www.donpotter.net/pdf/new-illiterates-quotes.pdf>

Helen R. Lowe

<http://donpotter.net/pdf/lowe-word-guessing-fallacy.pdf>

<http://donpotter.net/pdf/solomon-or-salami.pdf>

Dr. Patrick Groff

http://donpotter.net/pdf/groff_sight_words_1975.pdf

<http://donpotter.net/pdf/myths-of-reading-instructio.pdf>

Prof. William C. McMahon

http://donpotter.net/pdf/mchahon_syndrome.pdf

Louisa Moats

http://www.edexcellencemedia.net/publications/2007/200701_wholelanguagehijinks/Moats2007.pdf

<http://www.ldonline.org/article/6394/>

Charlie M. Richardson

<http://donpotter.net/pdf/richardson-shaywitz.pdf>

<http://donpotter.net/pdf/reading-charlie-richardson.pdf>

Geraldine Rodgers

<http://donpotter.net/pdf/hidden-story-quotations.pdf>

Donald Potter

http://donpotter.net/pdf/dangers_of_sight_words.pdf

Readsters Website

<http://www.readsters.com/wp-content/uploads/ComparingDolchAndFryLists.pdf>

Stephen Parker: *Reading Instruction and Phonics: Theory and Practice for Teachers*

https://drive.google.com/file/d/1SCwioYLFnU2KgPL4gBoybA_7fDp41_LJ/view

<https://amzn.to/2yYizzl>

Linnea C. Ehri: *Research on Learning to Read and Spell: A Personal-Historical Perspective* (1997)

<http://www.riggsinst.org/Ehri.asp>

Linnea C. Ehri: “Development of Sight Word Reading; Phases and Findings” (2004). I had trouble at first understanding Ehri until I came to realize that her scholarly use of the term “sight word” was **completely different** from the popular use of the term among educators.

<http://www.pitt.edu/~perfetti/PDF/Ehri.pdf>

John R. Beech: Ehri’s model of phases of learning to read: a brief critique (2005)

<http://d11literacy.pbworks.com/f/beeceh.pdf>

E. W. Dolch: A Basic Sight Vocabulary (*The Elementary School Journal*, Feb. 1936)

<http://twuread5503.pbworks.com/f/a%2Bbasic%2Bsight%2Bvocabulary.pdf>

Here is an up-to-date, well researched paper that makes favorable mention of Don Potter (my *Blend Phonics Nationwide Education Campaign*) and my co-worker Elizabeth Brown.

<https://digitalccbeta.coloradocollege.edu/pid/coccc:28571/datastream/OBJ>

“Learning to Read Words: Is it a Visual Memory Task?” By Maria S. Murray, Ph.D.

<https://youtu.be/-AMQtiAOWZg>

“Orthographic Mapping: What It Is and Why It’s So Important.” By Maria S. Murray, Ph.D.

<https://youtu.be/XfRHcUeGohc>

For more information on Dual-Route Theory pace Max Coltheart’s 2006 paper, “Dual route connectionist models of reading: An Overview.”

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/248933009_Dual_route_and_connectionist_models_of_reading_An_overview

Detailed Information on the Wrong Method of Creating Sight Word Reading Ability

Raw Sight Word Memorization w/o Phonics or Spelling

What NOT to do!

Below are two documents for teaching the Fry High Frequency Words. The Fry list is similar to the Dolch List, except that the Fry List includes nouns. Dolch did not include nouns because they are not true Service Words impacting directly the grammatical structure of the sentence and the ability to use syntax to assist the Three-Cueing System Guessing System. What Dolch called **Service Words** were later called **Function Words** by structural linguistics, such as Charles Fries.

First Fry Fluency Exercises:

<https://literacytransformations.files.wordpress.com/2016/09/1st-g-eng-ff.pdf>

Second Grade Fluency Exercises:

<https://www.fusd1.org/cms/lib03/AZ01001113/Centricity/Domain/375/Fluency%20Practice.pdf>

My Texas School district, Ector County ISD, has been using these Fry List Words for well over a decade. Before that, most of my tutoring students brought Dolch List words. It seems that practically all the teachers now use Fry. I shudder to think about the reading disabilities this whole word memorization of sight words sans phonics and spelling has created. I highly recommend *Blend Phonics* as the sure cure for guessing and the solid foundation for beginning reading and spelling without guessing.

Whole-to-Part Phonics versus Part-to-Whole Phonics.

The most elaborate defense of sight words that I have read is Margarete Moustafa's *Beyond Traditional Phonics: Research Discoveries and Reading Instruction*. She maintains that students who receive no direct phonics instruction, but memorize lots of words (sight and otherwise) will naturally apply onset-rime to learn to read, and do so better than kids who were taught upfront with direct instruction in the sound-to-symbol correspondences. Although attractive, since it relieves the teacher of the need to teach phonics directly, the theory seems to fly in the face of all research. She also calls her theory "whole-to-part" phonics in contrast with "part-to-whole phonics."

<https://www.fusd1.org/cms/lib03/AZ01001113/Centricity/Domain/375/Fluency%20Practice.pdf>

I was shocked recently to learn that highly respected Orton-Gillingham type programs such as *Take Flight* feature whole-word memorization of the 300 Fry Instant Sight Words, which may be the Achilles Heel of an otherwise sound phonics approach.

For the toughest cases of dyslexia, whether genetic or artificially induced, I highly recommend my *Natural Phonics Primer: A Universal Safety Net for Reading*. A valuable feature of this program is the free video instruction that are of great value for teacher, parent, and student.

<http://donpotter.net/natural-phonics-primer.html>

Sight Word Blues

Sight word is a confusing term
Defined in various ways
Educators talking past each other
Leading teachers astray.

So they end up drilling the kids
For hours and hours on end
Until they become so confused
They have no clue how to blend.

Kids are taught to look at **shapes**
Turning *squeals* into *squirrels* and *fog* into *frog*
Confusion reigns from morning till night
And the kids are stuck in a dark murky frog - Oops, that should be *fog*.

To redefine a popular term
Was a bad idea from the start
But scientists and educators all too often
Are miles and miles apart.

There is a cure that's close at hand
Natural Phonics Primer is its name
A sturdy Safety Net for Literacy
True literacy to regain.

For then they can read without guessing
Getting the meaning tried and true.
Every word becomes a sight word
While the sight word **method**, we eschew.

I wish they would follow the lead
Of a scholar who's ahead of the pack,
And adopt the term Brain Words*
And bring some sanity back.

By Donald Potter, May 13, 2023

**Brain Words: How the Science of Reading Informs Reading* by J. Richard Gentry & Gene Ouellette

My Mentor, Sam, used to call them:
The thalidomide of Education.
But he was talking about a **method**
And not the destination.