High Frequency Word Assessment: Implications for Instruction

Pikulski (1997) states, "Indeed, fluent word identification appears to be a prerequisite for comprehending text. If a reader must slowly analyze many of the words in a text, memory and attention needed for comprehension are drained by word analysis." (p. 2) Therefore, we must consider what teaching implications will best serve student's learning and transfer of automatic recognition of high frequency words.

Learning of High Frequency Words on Auto-pilot: Freedom for the Teacher

Instant recognition of words, especially high-frequency words, develops best when students read large amounts of text, particularly text that is relatively easy for the reader (Cunningham, 1995; Allington, 2000). This meets the criterion of providing a great deal of reading that facilitates enough practice reading HF words that a student can achieve the automatic recognition of high frequency words.

1. Students who are beginning to learn high frequency words and strugglers having difficulty building a set of known words often do not know how to look at the distinctive features in words. The same principles and practices that were used in teaching unknown letters can be used to teach high frequency words to mastery. Particularly, Marie Clay's (1985) three ways of remembering is critical to developing automatic word recognition of high frequency words.
    a. Seeing unknown word in print (Printing the word on a card)
    b. Talking about what the unknown word looks like
        (1). Spell the word saying the names of the letters in sequence.
        (2). Talk about tall and short letters in the word (e.g. "and" has two short letters and one tall letter).
        (3). Name the letter that comes first in an unknown word; the second letter; the last letter; the middle letters.
    c. Learning the unknown word using movement
        (1). Write the unknown word in various ways saying the word (NOT spelling the word) as it is written.
            (a). Saying the word while it is written allows students to make letter/sound matches when appropriate.
            (b). Saying the word when it is written allows students to notice irregularities in letter sound matches. Writing "find" while saying it lets the student know that even though the little word "in" appears in the word, it does not have the sound of "in."
        (2). In fact, over learning and massed practice are necessary for a student to master unknown information. Therefore, asking students to do the following will aid learning:
            (a). Write the unknown word once saying the word as it is written. Ask what letter sound matches the student identified.

      (b). Write it again saying the letter patterns (e.g. Student writes the "a" in "and" and says "short letter"; writes the "n" and says "short letter"; writes the "d" and says "tall letter."

      (c). Write the word again saying the name of each letter.

2. Reading text in which the student can be 96% accurate or above is critical to building a rich vocabulary of instantly recognized high frequency words.

   a. Students who are just beginning to read should have many books (7-10) at their independent reading level in their "reading baggie." This assures that they will have enough material to get the practice necessary.

   b. Students in very beginning books (Levels A-D) may be reading their books by repeating the patterned text they memorized, paying little attention to the words they are reading. Therefore, it is important to do the following:

      (1). Assure that these students are pointing under the words. This allows them to notice the high frequency words in the sentence.

      (2). Teach students to locate word wall words in a text before they read a page. This makes them aware of "islands of certainty" that they know how to read. They then can focus on thinking about what is going on in the story and the illustrations to help them with the more difficult words.

      (3). After a student reads a book correctly, ask him/her to locate known word wall words in the book. After s/he gets the idea of locating known words, s/he can do this alone or with a partner.

   c. Students reading at higher levels should be keeping a reading log, and should be reinforced for accumulating and maintaining a high amount of time reading.

3. Harris & Hodges (1995) define both word recognition and word identification as "the process of determining the pronunciation and some degree of meaning of an unknown word" (pp. 282-283). For words that are in a reader's meaning vocabulary, unlocking the pronunciation leads to the word's meaning.

   a. If a printed word is not in a reader's meaning vocabulary, word-identification skills may allow access to the word's pronunciation, but not its meaning.

   b. Activities described above allow students to develop automatic recognition of high frequency words, but students must also have some idea of the word's meaning or function. Without some understanding of the word, they cannot use the words to comprehend text. Therefore, we as teachers must allow time to teach the meaning or function of high frequency words.

      (1). Tierney and Mosenthal (1982) call high frequency words the wharf and woof that holds our language together. Some of these words do not have meaning alone, but take on meaning in the context of a sentence (e.g. where, here). Other words merely have a function (e.g. "the" is a noun marker). Some categories of high frequency words that must be taught for automatic recognition and for identifying their meaning or function follow:

I REFERENCE

   A. Personals (He, him, they, them, theirs, it, its, etc.)

      Three young businessmen had lunch together. THEY ended up drinking too much.

   B. Demonstrative (this, these, that, those, here, there, then)

      Dr. Forbes drove two miles out of town to see Mrs. Jones. Two days later, he drove THERE again.

   C. Comparatives (same, equal, better, more, identically, so)

      John sold three tires for the price of one. Jack asked him, "Won't you give me the SAME deal?"

II. SUBSTITUTION/ELLIPSIS

   A. Substitution—This type of cohesive tie places one item with another.

      My razor is dull. I need a new ONE.

   B. Ellipsis—The tie omits an item that is assumed.

      I can only remember the names of 48 states. I need to name TWO MORE. (Hint: two more what?)

III. LEXICAL COHESION
   A. Reiteration—s with reference establishes a relationship of identity with the presupposed item. In being reiterative, a word (tie) need not be identical to the presupposed item.
            Dick and I did the climb to Window Rock.' The ASCENT was easy.

   B. Collocation—The association of lexical items that regularly co-occur across expanses of sentences. Consider the following cohesive chaining of words that can be related in a story about Sunday morning.
            Newsstand, Sunday Newspaper, funnies, read, dad cooks breakfast, church, relaxation. Expanding the associative potential of collocational items emphasizes the semantic power of a shared lexical environment independent of text structure.

IV. CONJUNCTION (and, but, so, next, etc.) – Conjunctions that create an instance of semantic connection in which the conjunctive item receives a cohesive emphasis that characterizes the relationship between the two sentences.
            He is cheap sometimes. BUT, he can be generous when he wants to. They'll
            be back at 10 o'clock. SO come over early.

The following contractions can establish various kinds of ties.
   1. Additive (and, nor, furthermore, by the way, thus, in the same way)
   2. Adversative connectives (yet, but, however in fact, on the other hand, rather, in any case)
   3. Causal Connectives (so, because, it follows)
   4. Temporal Connectives (finally, then, meanwhile, to sum up)
      (Tierney and Mosenthal, 1982, Pp. 69-78.)

Remember, being able to arrive at the pronunciation of a printed word constitutes word identification in the most minimal sense; however, if the reader is unable to attach meaning to the word, then he or she has not read the word, since reading must end in meaning construction.

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