



EVERY CHILD A READER

Online Preview Edition

September, 1998

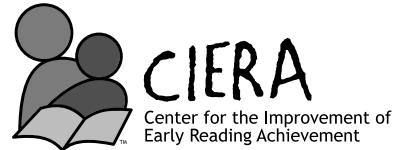


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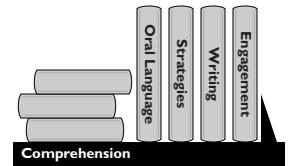
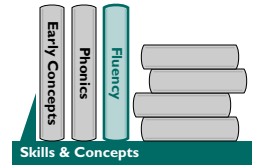


EVERY CHILD A READER

TOPIC 4

High-Frequency Words and Fluency

Proficient readers recognize the vast majority of words in texts quickly, allowing them to focus on the meaning of the text. Since approximately 300 words account for 65% of the words in texts, rapid recognition of these words during the primary grades forms the foundation of fluent reading.



Well, I had the operation. For a long time after that, Uncle Jed came by every day to see how I was doing. I know that delayed him from opening the barbershop. — from *Uncle Jed's Barbershop*^a

This passage, which third graders might be expected to read, fits the profile of word frequency in texts (in the table below). That is, 65% of the words in this selection are among the 300 most frequent words in English texts.¹ If by third grade children are spending as much time attending to words such as *well*, *the*, and *after* as they do to *operation* and *delayed*, their comprehension will be impeded.

Number of words	Percentage of words in overall texts	Examples of words from <i>Uncle Jed's Barbershop</i>
25	33%	I, the, for, a, that, to, was, from
100	50%	had, long, time, by, day, see, do(ing), how, him
300	65%	well, came, every, after, know
1,000	75%	
5,000	90%	operation, Uncle, Jed, delayed, barbershop
85,000	100%	

Fluency refers to the ability to identify words rapidly so that attention is directed at the meaning of the text.

At the heart of independent reading is rapid recognition of a core group of words, beginning with the 25 most frequent words and extending by the end of the primary grades to the 5,000 words that account for 90% of texts.²

While instantaneous recognition of high-frequency words is necessary, the solution is not as simple as beginning with the 25 most frequent words, moving to the next 25, and so on. Of the first 25 words, almost half have irregular letter-sound patterns (e.g., *was* rhymes with *fuzz*, not *has*). Since these high-frequency words are “glue” words (i.e., conjunctions, prepositions, inactive verbs), young children cannot associate concrete and familiar objects with them as they can with words like *dog* or *kangaroo*. Because high-frequency words are function words, efforts to base texts solely on these words results in stilted text such as: “You can have this. I can have this. He can have this.”³

Rapid recognition of this core group of high-frequency words is gained through extensive involvement in reading and writing. For young children, these occasions often involve oral reading where children read quickly, expressively, and with good phrasing, a process described as **fluent reading**.

Accomplishments for High-Frequency Words and Fluency⁴

KINDERGARTEN	FIRST GRADE	SECOND GRADE	THIRD GRADE
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognizes some words by sight, including a few very common ones (a, the, I, my, you, is, are) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reads aloud with accuracy and comprehension any text that is appropriately designed for the first half of grade one Recognizes common, irregularly spelled words by sight (<i>have, said, where, two</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reads and comprehends both fiction and nonfiction that is appropriately designed for grade level 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reads and comprehends both fiction and nonfiction that is appropriately designed for grade level

Children who finish first grade with the ability to read end-of-first-semester first-grade text (also called **primer level**) typically can recognize the 100 highest-frequency words with ease.⁵ Recognition vocabularies need to expand substantially during second and third grade, but a fundamental recognition base is expected in first grade. Some children attain primer-level reading at some point in second grade and go on to become good readers. Reports on children who do not master this core group of 100 high-frequency words until third grade and go on to become good readers are infrequent.

Instruction of High-Frequency Words and Fluency

Word walls

Word walls consist of a chart where high-frequency words currently under study are posted with those studied previously.

Children's fluency with high-frequency words reflects instruction that highlights particular words. Clusters of words from a list, such as the 100 most frequent words in written English, can be presented in lessons and activities. One effective way of presenting these words is the word wall.⁶ A handful of high-frequency words is presented weekly. Each addition is mounted on the word wall, where words are categorized alphabetically by first letter.

One word wall activity is a daily warm-up where children practice new and old words by saying them quickly or writing the words. In some classes, children write the words on their own cards, adding them to their word banks along with personal words such as favorite toys or pets' names. Small-group lessons in which specific words are found and studied in books and where sentences are made with word cards will help some children to integrate high-frequency words into their recognition vocabulary. The word wall is a focal point in a classroom as children refer to the words in independent spelling and reading.

100 Most Frequent Words in Written English⁷

the	he	be	but	which	out	into	no	made	long
of	for	this	what	their	them	has	make	over	little
and	was	from	all	said	then	more	than	did	very
a	on	I	were	if	she	her	first	down	after
to	are	have	when	do	many	two	been	only	words
in	as	or	we	will	some	like	its	way	called
is	with	by	there	each	so	him	who	find	just
you	his	one	can	about	these	see	now	use	where
that	they	had	an	how	would	time	people	may	most
it	at	not	your	up	other	could	my	water	know

Selecting appropriate texts

At all times during the primary grades, children need to read books in which most of the words have been previously taught as either high-frequency words, words which the children can sequentially decode, or words with known phonograms.

Reading from appropriately difficult texts is important, but it is essential that texts give children a chance to apply the high-frequency words and phonics of lessons during early reading instruction⁸ when skills and confidence are being established. Texts in beginning reading programs typically include a range of structures,⁹ such as short picture books with a repetitive pattern; poems which rhyme; simple books with strong picture support; or short, decodable books which focus on either a particular vowel sound, several similar phonograms (letter(s) symbolizing sounds in speech), or a particular consonant sound.

Several principles should be kept in mind as primary teachers in a school identify sets of books and individual books for reading instruction. First, children benefit from exposure to many books rather than a handful of books that they memorize. When children see only a few books, especially when the books have a sentence or phrase that is repeated, they may memorize the text. While memorizing text can be a transitional stage to conventional reading

for many kindergartners,¹⁰ continued use of this strategy will detract from word recognition accuracy and fluency.¹¹

Second, the books that children read should be ones with which they are highly successful. Books in which children can decode about 95% of the words accurately (no more than 5 errors in 100 words) should be used in lessons where teachers guide children in word recognition strategies. If children only read books that are at their frustration level (below 90% accuracy in word recognition), they struggle too much with the words, which interferes with comprehension and reading growth.

Multiple activities for fluent reading

By increasing the amount of partner reading, independent reading, and home reading in second grade, teachers were able to bring almost all second graders in high-poverty schools to proficient reading.

For children to become fluent readers who devote their attention to the meaning of texts, many opportunities to read appropriately difficult text are needed throughout the primary grades. These opportunities must be well planned, especially when there are high numbers of potentially at-risk children in a school. An intervention for second graders in low-income schools showed that a substantial percentage of children who entered second grade as struggling readers could become proficient readers through three activities:¹²

- **Choral and partner reading** became integral parts of lessons. Teachers' lessons were redesigned to increase the amount of time that children spent reading texts under study through choral reading, followed by reading between partners. While the teacher listened to individuals read, children read in pairs with the goal of reading quickly and expressively. Partner reading is also effective during times when everyone in a class works with a partner. Routines for assisting a peer in identifying words must be established for this activity to be an effective learning experience.
- **Independent reading** from self-selected books occurred several times each week. When engaging students in this process, it is important to help students learn how to select books that are "within the range of difficulty" for independent reading. This is best handled by implementing a set of classroom strategies. First, teachers can discuss with children the importance of reading books that are "just right" for them—not too easy, not too hard. Second, teachers can teach them how to select books that are "just right." A successful approach for younger readers is to color code the books in classroom and school libraries (stickers on the spine will do) and then direct each child to the appropriate color sticker.
- **Home reading** was supported through nightly reading plans and books that traveled from school to home. These programs have proven popular and successful in supporting the progress of struggling readers. Clear guidelines and expectations, however, are essential for their success. Guidelines that answer families' questions such as "Am I supposed to just listen or should I correct mistakes when my child reads at home?" are useful. These guidelines can be in a pamphlet sent or mailed home or in the form of special classes offered for parents by the school.

Instruction for English Language Learners

Assisted reading, in which children read a text at a steady pace along with a proficient reader in person or on an audiotape, has proven highly effective in increasing the fluency of English language learners.

Several projects with children of various ages have proven that assisted reading increases fluent, independent reading.¹³ Assisted reading involves the support of a proficient reader, sometimes in a tutoring or small-group setting or on an audiotape. Assisted reading can be especially effective with English language learners. Reading along with a proficient reader, whether on tape or in person, aids English language learners in the phrasing of text as well as in pronunciations of words. A program that has proven effective is one in which children take home audiotaped texts and tape recorders.¹⁴ Opportunities for feedback and modeling of reading English have resulted in higher reading levels among English language learners.

Passages for assisted reading should contain predominantly familiar words. Further, children should be taught simple techniques for charting their own progress. One approach is to plot the number of words read correctly in a given time frame (one minute, two minutes, or the like). This sort of measure, which allows both students and teachers to examine progress on a simple measure, has been an important part of several programs that improve both student engagement and reading level.

Instruction for Children Who Are Struggling Readers

Most struggling readers read too little text to become fluent readers. Even worse, what they do read is often too difficult for them. The prospects for struggling readers improve when they are provided with opportunities to work on their fluency. Assisted and repeated readings with audiotapes and adults, partner reading, and home reading can all contribute to their fluency. These activities should occur consistently in all the primary grades, especially in second and third grades, which is a critical point in children's reading development. Many have developed into "accurate" readers, but they often lack the fluency required for successful middle-grade reading.

Reading with younger children provides occasions for involving struggling second- and third-grade readers with easy text.

Additional opportunities for increasing the fluent reading of second and third graders who are struggling readers can occur through their reading with younger children.¹⁵ When choosing books for young children, upper-primary children need to study books from the vantage point of both interest and difficulty. In doing so, older children are rereading books that are easier for them and can be read quickly, thus giving them opportunities to develop fluency. The activity of reading to the younger child should be preceded by practicing for the event. During this practice, discussions of intonation, phrasing, and comprehension questions involve struggling readers in a close examination of these tasks, and as an added benefit, their own reading processes.

**EVERY CHILD A READER:
COMPANION READINGS**

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NOTES

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CHILDREN'S BOOKS

- ^a Mitchell, M.K. (1993). *Uncle Jed's Barbershop*. New York: Simon & Schuster Books for Young Readers.

This topic is part of the series *Every Child a Reader* by E.H. Hiebert, P.D. Pearson, B.M. Taylor, V. Richardson, & S.G. Paris of the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA).

Every Child a Reader: Companion Readings has been compiled by E.H. Hiebert, K. Skalitzky, & K. Tesnar and is available through CIERA (courtesy of the International Reading Association).

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21011-04 (9/98)


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