Teaching High Frequency Words

What is the difference between high frequency words and sight words?

High frequency words are the words we encounter the most frequently in print.

Did you know that…..

- 13 words account for more than 25% of words in print: *a, and, for, he, is, in, it, of, that, the, to, was, & you* (Johns, 1980).
- The top 100 words make up almost 50% of words in print (Adams, 1990; Carroll, Davies, & Richman, 1971; Fry, Kress, & Fountoukidis, 1993).

Sight words are any words that a reader can read automatically, accurately and effortlessly. If you are effortlessly reading the words on this page, for example, all of these words are sight words for you. Everyone's sight word memory is different because experiences, background knowledge and career paths affect the words we are exposed to. The ultimate goal of decoding is to build students' sight word memory so that they are able to focus on comprehension because they do not need to exert mental effort on decoding words.

Does every high frequency word need to be explicitly taught?

Nope! According to Hanna, Hanna, Hodges, and Rudorf (1966), once students learn letter-sound correspondences, spelling generalizations, and spelling rules, 84% of English words can be predictably spelled. About half of English words can be spelled accurately solely based on letter-sound correspondences, and another 34% of English words would have only have one error if they were spelled only by letter-sound correspondences (the spelling error usually occurs with the vowel sound as some vowel sounds have multiple spellings).

Irregular words are those that cannot be sounded out (they have irregular phoneme-grapheme correspondences). While irregular high frequency words *do* need to be explicitly taught in order for students to be able to read and spell them, high frequency words that are decodable do not need to be explicitly taught. These regular words can be taught in alignment to a sequence for phoneme-grapheme correspondences, spelling generalizations, and spelling rules. However, it is also important to note that students may need explicit instruction for some decodable words in order to learn their meaning or functional use. It is recommended that students learn 3-5 irregular words per week (Moats, 2005). Students should also be able to automatically and accurately read and write the top 248 high frequency words by the end of grade 2 (Blevins, 2017).

Why not just teach students to memorize words using flash cards?

Readers store irregular words in the brain in the same way that regular words are stored (Gough & Walsh, 1991; Lovett, 1987; Treiman & Baron, 1981). Readers look at individual letters and letter patterns in a word and connect the letters to the sounds they represent (Ehri, 1992). Brain research has taught us that in order to learn a new word we must activate three parts of the brain: Where sound is stored, where the word's meaning is stored, and where the word's spelling (individual letters) is stored (Blevins 2017).

Flash card practices tend to encourage students to attempt to memorize words as whole units; students often do not attend to the phoneme-grapheme correspondences in the word. Research indicates that students need to be aware of the regular and irregular parts of a word in order to commit it to memory. Moreover, the vast majority of irregular words have only a single irregular letter-sound relationship, making the letter-sound relationships students already know quite useful for learning a word (Kilpatrick, 2016). This makes word study a much more powerful tool than "flashcard rote memorization."

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