Session Title: Why Kids Struggle with Sight Words and How SLPs Can Help

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A. What is a sight word?

1. In reading science- A word that is instantly, automatically recognized in print.
2. In common classroom parlance- high-frequency words and/or words with phonetically irregular spellings (e.g. Dolce & Fry lists)
3. Sight words are often presented as those words teachers expect students to memorize, and are identified a separate from phonetically regular, or decodable words
4. Sight words are often "function words"- words that serve more grammatical function than cary significant semantic information. (Miles, McFadden, & Ehri, 2018)
   - Includes conjunctions, prepositions, auxiliary verbs, irregular verb inflections
   - First 15 of Fry List: the, of, and, a, to, in, is, you, that, it, he, was, for, are, as
   - From Dolch 1: again, any, by, could, has, how may, some, where, when

B. How a New Word in Print Becomes a Sight Word in Typical Development

1. Creating a sight word means bonding its orthographic identity to its other identities (phonological, semantic, syntactic). *The process is the same for regular and irregular words.*
2. Ehri's Phase Theory of Sight Word Reading (Ehri, 2005)
   a. Pre-Alphabetic Phase: children read words by remembering visual or contextual cues (e.g. MacDonald's sign, their name tag at school)
   b. Partial Alphabetic Phase: children use the sound associations for *some* letters to form connections between spellings and pronunciations to identify printed word
      i. Requires some phonemic awareness, but not complete segmentation
      ii. Often involves recognition of beginning and ending sounds only
      iii. May strongly reference letter names, not full understanding of letter-sound relationships for more complex relationships ("double u" = w)
      iv. Doesn't secure full spellings in memory. May support recalling some letters, usually first and last
      v. Poor readers often get stuck here
   c. Full Alphabetic Phase: children use decoding skill and graphophonemic knowledge to bond spellings fully to their pronunciations in memory.
      i. Requires (1) phonemic proficiency in blending, segmenting, substitution, (2) letter-sound mastery (3) cipher knowledge (decoding)
      ii. Can support full storage of written words in memory, word by word
      iii. Poor readers often get stuck here.
   d. Consolidated Alphabetic Phase: predominant types of connections for retaining sight words in memory are morphographemic or unitized
      i. Automatic recognition of rime units, bound morphemes, roots, analogs

        ii. digraphs, blends, clusters are treated as units

        iii. Monosyllabic words that have become sight words promote storage of multisyllabic words by serving as familiar units

        iv. Speeds recognition and storage beyond the sound level

3. All irregular words have some regular sound-letter correspondence. Readers use the conventional letter-sound combinations to "anchor" those irregular words in memory, forming a "phonological framework." (Kilpatrick, 2016)

C. Why is sight word learning hard for some children?

1. Mapping is not a visual memory skill, but is dependent on phonological and linguistic foundations.

2. Studies of typical development show that it is easier to orthographically map to semantically concrete words than to context dependent ("function") words (Miles & Ehri 2017).

3. This relationship has not been specifically examined in children with DLD, but we do know that

- Syntax is frequently a point of weakness for kids with DLD.
- Vulnerabilities in both phonological and semantic pathways result in double deficit of word learning challenges for kids with DLD.
- Mapping letters to other word identities (phonological, semantic, syntactic) is at risk when those identities are weak. (Dawson & Ricketts, 2017)

D. Instructional Implications: Speech to Print, NOT Print to Speech

1. Common classroom approaches to sight word learning presume it's a visual memory task.

2. Effective instruction that promotes sight word storage must acknowledge the phonological and orthographic steps that remain relevant even when the word in phonetically irregular.

3. Intervention to establish phonemic segmentation, blending, and substitution skills will contribute to mapping foundations.

4. Multiple studies by Ehri show that phonemic awareness (PA) instruction that includes reference to articulatory movements is more effective than sound-based PA activities alone.

5. Semantic/syntactic features of targeted words need to be considered. Children with language difficulties may need to solidify multiple word features before they can map the orthography.

6. Core principle: Start with the spoken word, then map on the letters.

Suggested Steps for Teaching Irregular Words to Automaticity
Adapted from Kilpatrick, 2016 and Miles, Rubin & Gonzaelz-Frey 2017

First Introduction to the Target Word
1. Say the word.
2. Have the student repeat the word.
3. Use the word in a spoken sentence.
4. Have your student use the word in a spoken sentence. Repeat as needed to represent a variety of usages. Don't take their understanding of usage for granted! With children with DLDs, this is probably less developed than expected.
5. Discuss the sound properties of the word. Count syllables. Note any familiar rime units. Have the student segment the phonemes in the word, using a manipulative to mark each. Assist as needed, ensuring accuracy. Optional steps:
    • Check your student's knowledge of the sounds *out of order*.
    • What's the first/last/second/middle sound?
    • Where is the /__/ sound?
    • [point to a marker] What sound is this?
6. Both you and your student draw underlines on your paper/board as a placeholder for each sound.
7. Ask the student to predict what letters we could use to spell these sounds based on common sound-symbol correspondences.
8. Write the letters your student suggests on *your* paper/board. *The student does not write.*
9. Show the printed word.
    • Optional: Practice pronouncing the word as it is spelled. (e.g. *wed-nes-day*) Contrast with typical pronunciation, calling attention to the differences.
10. Compare the conventional spelling to the student's prediction and discuss the differences.
11. Have the student write the conventional spelling on their paper/board so that the letters sit on the lines of the sound they represent or connect to.
    • Optional: You write a sentence with the word used contextually to reinforce syntactic and semantic connections.
12. Put away the word card and cover up the student's spelling, then have the student spell it again from memory.

Review sessions
1. Say the word.
2. Have the student repeat the word.
3. Practice usage by generating spoken sentences as needed.
4. Have the student segment the phonemes and draw underlines on their paper/board for each.
5. Student writes the letters in the conventional spelling, matching letters to their underline placeholders.
6. Show the printed word.
7. Compare the student's spelling to the conventional spelling. Provide feedback.
8. Cover or remove both printed versions of the word and have the student spell it orally.

Practice for Student Near Mastery or Maintaining
1. Say a target word.
2. Have the student repeat the word.
3. Have the student write the word.
4. Continue with multiple target words, forming written list on the student's board or paper.
5. Have the student read the words back, out of order.