

# **BUILDING FLUENCY OF SIGHT WORDS**

**by**

**Nadia Marzouk**

**August, 2008**

**A thesis submitted to the  
Department of Education and Human Development of the  
State University of New York College at Brockport  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Science in Education**

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by

Nadia Marzouk

APPROVED BY:

Thomas R. Allen

Advisor

8/8/08

Date

[Signature]

Director, Graduate Programs

8/11/08

Date

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## Chapter I

### Introduction

Print is everywhere: signs, billboards, product labels, books, and fast food logos, to name a few. Proficient readers may notice that their eyes automatically read the print around them. Young children are able to identify familiar print in their world, as a McDonald's, the word Coke versus Pepsi, and the stop sign at the end of a street. Words which have been encountered frequently, that a reader no longer needs to laboriously sound them out, are referred to as "sight words". Teaching sight words is a process that has been utilized for many years. Linnea Ehri, a leading researcher in sight word acquisition, found that sight word reading refers not to a method of teaching reading but to the process of reading words by accessing them in memory (Ehri, 1995). Sight word recognition also refers to the ability to read words that do not adhere to traditional decoding strategies. Often these words do not follow regular rules of spelling, so students will not be able to easily decode, or sound them out – they must simply know it when they see it. For example, such words as: the, was, to, and are, to name a few.

Sight word vocabulary can assist young readers with finding a purpose for reading. As early as 1992, researchers such as Simmons, (1992) recognized the importance of sight word recognition in beginning readers. Simmons found that recognition of these words can contribute to a decreased in comprehension and motivation, otherwise reading can become slow and discouraging without knowledge of high frequency sight words. Sight words, or high frequency words, are the words most encountered in any text. It is estimated that there are approximately 600,000

words in the English language, but a mere thirteen of them, a, and for, he, is, in, it, of, that, the, to, was, you - account for 25 percent of the words in print. A study conducted as early as 1936 by Edward William Dolch, PhD. revealed that there are 100 words that make up 50 percent of the words we read. Dolch assembled this list of sight words by looking at children's books which were popular at the time his research was published. (Dolch 1948) These words are known as high-frequency words because they are encountered most often in daily reading.

There are several reasons why students should be explicitly taught high-frequency words. One is that many of their words such as: the, is, to, and are, do not follow commonly taught phonics rules and cannot be sounded out or decoded. Sight words often do not sound as their spelling might suggest. The only way a student can read these words is to memorize them creating the ability to recognize them by sight. A second reason why students should be taught high-frequency words is that sight word recognition improves reading ability. Possessing automaticity of the most commonly used words by sight will make a student a faster and more fluent reader. When words are quickly recognized by sight, meaning is not lost and comprehension improves (Johnston 1998). Students who need to pause and attempt to figure out many of the words they read, lose the ability to comprehend. Moats, (2001) agree and adds, that students who read slowly often fail to complete their work, lose interest in school, and seldom read for pleasure. Lastly, teaching high frequency words will help to support a student's knowledge of language structure, the patterns we speak, and the language of the books we read.

Linnea Ehri, stated that there are four different ways to read words (Ehri, 1991). The first way is by decoding words. Sounding out and blending graphemes into phonemes, or chunking the word into syllabic units is commonly used. Another way to read is by analogizing, using words already known to read a similar word. For example reading the word little, to be able to read the word brittle. The third way is by using prediction skills. This involves using context and letter clues to guess unfamiliar words. The last way of reading words is by memory or sight. This applies to words we are familiar with and have encountered in previous text.

Sight words are taught in numerous ways. Cunningham (1999) notes that flash cards, worksheets, writing words in sentences, and word walls help focus children's attention on the printed form of words in isolation. Another way to teach sight words is by the use of a multi-sensory approach. Researchers such as Dolch realized the importance of teaching high frequency words and of teaching these words in various ways: however, Pulliam and Kirk (1954) suggested retention of sight words is much greater when a tracing method of instruction is used. Tactile (tracing) and multi-sensory methods of instruction proved to be an effective strategy tool for use in vocabulary development and sight word retention. Past and current researchers concur, that teaching high frequency words is beneficial to all students.

#### Statement of the Problem

There is a large gap between students who have sight word proficiency and students who have not yet mastered this skill. The question to be answered is whether kindergarten students will be able to master, identify, and read high frequency words in text. In my kindergarten class, the focus was on ten basic sight words for one

month using flash cards, word walls, and the morning message with basic sight words. In addition a weekly homework packet was assigned to support the words being taught. The evaluation of word recognition was measured by sight word pre and post tests. Emphasizing high frequency words helped the students become word conscious, in turn, helped my students become fluent readers.

### Significance of the Problem

In many schools students are expected to be able to read simple material by second grade. In kindergarten, the emphasis is placed on phonics and phonemic awareness. The current reading program that is used teaches one letter/sound per week. Very little emphasis is placed on high frequency words. One of the most important goals in teaching young students to read is making sure that the reading program is balanced with phonics as well as the use of sight words. Proficiency is measured by the student's ability to read words automatically, instead of decoding, or reading sound by sound. If students are able to identify signs, and restaurant logos, cereal boxes by sight, why not have students recognize high frequency words by sight?

### Rationale

The focus of any successful reading program should be on finding meaningful fictional and non-fictional text at each student's instructional level to support the use of reading strategies and comprehension skills. Students will not be able to enjoy

reading and construct meaning unless they are able to read and decode words effortlessly. In kindergarten, a balanced literacy program is a must if students are expected to succeed. Sight words are some of the most frequently used words in the English language. (Even though there are 200 basic sight words which comprise approximately 50 percent of any given general, non-technical text.) Therefore, teaching sight words as early as possible is considered a critical component of elementary education. Teaching sight word vocabulary will benefit my small guided reading groups since pre-primer books are written with many of the basic sight words. Once students have mastered basic words that appear frequently, then more time can be devoted to reading.

There are two additional reasons why it is important to give sight words priority. One reason is that phonetic analysis cannot be applied to many of the sight words, such as the word 'was', it is read 'waz', and the word 'of', is read 'ov'. A second reason is that few of the sight words such as if, was and an, are used to support text.

Even though it may take considerable effort and time for a student to learn the entire sight word list, it is beneficial. Having the ability to recognize these words quickly can dramatically increase confidence and improve reading proficiency of the beginning reader. Since complete fluency with sight words is the foundation of literacy, a variety of techniques must be used to teach them. Repetition and practice are very important in making sight words recognition automatic.

The following chapter examines the current research on sight word acquisition. In the literature review, I discuss the importance of acquiring sight words, and to show several research studies on increasing reading fluency and comprehension, since reading comprehension goes hand in hand with reading vocabulary.

#### Definition of Key Terms

**Sight Word** - Words that student are able to read without sounding out. For example, their name, and the word stop.

**High Frequency word** - Words that appear frequently in text such as, *the, and, is* which students can automatically read without decoding.

## Chapter II

### Literature Review

#### Acquisition of Sight Words

Learning to read is a life-long process. Educators, parents, and policymakers agree that literacy is one of the most important skills a student needs to function in society. There are many ways to achieve literacy; however, educators, parents, and policymakers do not agree on the exact methods to reach this goal. For example, scholarship and analysis has called into question the efficacy of employing many of the strategies of whole language with students who are at risk of school problems. (Katz-Sulgrove, M, Peck, S.M. and McLaughlin, T.F, 2002). An additional difficulty is that many schools continue to employ instructional methods that lack empirical support and validity to teach literacy to their students. (Carnine, D., Silbert, J. Kameenue, E. J. & Tarver, S.G. 2004; Katz-Sulgrove, et al., 2002) Research in reading indicates that children who read will tend to succeed in school and in adult life. (National Reading Panel, 2002) Therefore, the converse may be applied: students who have not mastered reading fluency skills have an increased chance of dropping out of school.

The National Institute for Literacy (NIFL, 2001) has identified five critical components to teaching children to read, which were summarized in the report of the National Reading Panel (2002). These components included phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and text comprehension instruction. Of these

components, this action-research focused on the process of building fluency by centering on sight words or high-frequency words.

The National Reading Panel identified fluency as a key ingredient in successful reading instruction (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000). Rasinski, a reading fluency researcher, identifies fluency as, “The ability to read accurately, quickly, effortlessly, and with appropriate expression and meaning.” (Rasinski, 2003 p.126). Since the emphasis on reading at the word level is the most popular conception of fluent reading, it makes sense for all concerned to consider what words students should learn to enhance their fluency. Readers must both decode words and access their meaning automatically. Reading fluency is important because it affects students’ reading efficiency and comprehension.

Fluency can be increased through repeated oral reading with feedback and guidance (NICHD, 2000). How to best teach reading is the subject of great controversy in educational circles, with a balanced reading program found to be most effective. Researchers agree on reading programs that offer phonics and whole words to be the most effective. Although researchers agree that balanced literacy is most effective, their methods in reaching this goal differ. Torgesen, (1998) a professor of psychology and education at Florida State University and director of the Florida Center for Reading Research, describes two general types of skill and knowledge that are required for good reading comprehension: general language comprehension ability and the ability to accurately and fluently identify the words in print. In other

words, vocabulary comprehension and good word reading skills are the most critical skills required for effective understanding of written material.

Another leading researcher in this field is Linnea Ehri. Her extensive research is on reading acquisition and how beginning readers learn to read words. Ehri's focus is on school-age children as well as students with learning disabilities. Her theory of reading links phonics and sight-word reading skills by showing how good phonetic reading skills are the foundation of sight-word recognition (Ehri, 2005).

One question that has challenged researchers is how children learn to read and comprehend text rapidly and with ease. Ehri noted that when readers read text, the print fills their mind with ideas. Therefore, the reading process begins with individual printed words. Words are the basic unit that readers' eyes pick up and process to construct meaning out of print. The key to understanding how reading skills develop is to consider how beginners learn to recognize written words accurately and effortlessly.

The term "sight word" refers to the concept that any word that is read sufficiently often becomes a sight word that is read from memory. Sight words are individual words that readers have learned to recognize without having to analyze them. These words are known by sight and are common words learned as wholes, with no pauses between word parts. Ehri refers to this process as unitization (Ehri, 2005). Ehri points out that less-skilled reader do not show unitization until fourth grade (poor readers do not see words as a whole). Her conclusion is consistent with other findings that poor readers have difficulty with sight-word reading (Ehri & Saltmarsh, 1995). Skilled readers recognize words and word parts at a glance, read

them, and comprehend meaning. Unitization helps students to recognize words quickly to support fluency and understanding.

How do students learn to read words by sight? Learning to read words by sight is a connection-forming process. Connections are formed that link spelling and written words to their pronunciations and meanings in memory (Ehri, 2005). The connections are formed out of the reader's knowledge of the alphabetic system. For example, the reader understands certain letters combined, together to form specific words such as *c-a-t* form the word *cat*. This includes: knowledge of how the word looks (grapheme), how the word sounds (phoneme), and the relationship of phonemic awareness (separate phonemes-sounds in words). This also includes knowledge of spelling patterns that recur in different words, such as the *at* pattern that is in *bat* and *cat*. Ehri (2005) states:

When readers learn a sight word, they look at the spelling, they pronounce the word, they distinguish separate phonemes in the pronunciation, and they recognize how the graphemes match up to phonemes in that word. Reading the word a few times secures its connections in memory. (Ehri, 2005 p. 170)

Therefore, students develop a vocabulary of sight words that they can instantly recognize and understand.

### Implementing Sight Words Instruction

Students entering kindergarten vary in ability in preparation for reading instruction. Some only have sporadic exposure to pre-reading activities, while others are exposed to print and literature. For instance, some students know the alphabet,

while other students may know and recognize letters and sounds, and some students may have an understanding of the concept of what a word is. Regardless of the students' ability, reading skills are vital. Therefore, the first step in teaching students to read is developing a foundation of fundamental words, which students can recognize on sight, referred to as high-frequency words.

High-frequency words refer to how often a word is found in print materials, which reflects their usage in the spoken language. Several studies have looked at the impact of word frequency, word recognition, and word production. High-frequency words are recognized faster and more accurately in word-recognition tasks. Poor readers at all grade levels are characterized by a slower than normal development of sight word vocabulary that can be read fluently and automatically. For these students, time is spent on trying to decode the word and word parts rather than on constructing the meaning.

An important aspect to anchor sight-word reading is phonological awareness and alphabet knowledge. Ehri acknowledges the importance of having a sufficient knowledge of the alphabetic system in order to learn sight words quickly and to remember them long term. These elements, the alphabetic system and phonological awareness, have long been prerequisites to the phonological recoding process necessary for access to meaning and pronunciations of unfamiliar words. Stuart (2000) explored the relationship between phonological awareness, sound to letter mapping knowledge, and the printed word learning in five-year-old readers. He also investigated the effects of visual memory and teaching methods. The results suggest

that beginning readers need considerably more repetition of printed vocabulary words.

Stuart (2000) examines two methods of instruction of sight-word acquisition: using flashcards and using textbooks to introduce sight-word vocabulary. The results clearly show that teaching children new vocabulary by using flashcards leads to successful acquisition of sight words vocabulary, and takes less time than teaching children by repeated reading of books. The results indicate that using flashcards to teach sight vocabulary is an excellent way of focusing students' attention on one specific word as opposed to being distracted by reading four or five words in sentences. The flashcard task focuses the students' attention on the word to be learned, which leads to recognition and greater understanding of the text.

A different strategy used to anchor sight-word acquisition is to create a word-rich environment using word walls. A word wall is made up of a carefully selected and displayed list or groups of words used by students to build familiarity with common sight words. It serves as a visual scaffold, provides students with familiar word patterns to assist students in decoding unfamiliar words, and is useful when students write. Patricia Cunningham, a professor of education at Wake Forest University, has over 30 years experience in various elementary grades and with remedial reading programs. Cunningham promotes literacy for all children and has published many books, including, *Phonics They Use* (2000), in which she emphasizes the importance of having a word- rich environment where students are surrounded by print. Consequently, a word wall is one that would promote an environment in which print is located.

Over the past two decades, research has revealed the kind of vocabulary instruction that is most effective in helping students comprehend what they read. Based on its analysis of their research, the National Reading Panel (2002) concluded that no single instructional method is sufficient for optimal vocabulary learning; therefore, effective instruction must use a variety of methods to help students acquire new words and increase the depth of their word knowledge over time.

Effective instruction includes opportunities for both incidental word learning and intentional word teaching. Using environmental print and word walls are examples of incidental word learning, which occurs as the result of taking in and learning from one's surroundings. Providing explicit instruction such as phonics is an example of intentional word teaching, which occurs as the result of learning from planned instruction. Allen, (1999) concurs with Cunningham (2000) regarding word walls when he strongly suggests that in order for students to learn words, a classroom must be inundated with print in full view, so that students are able to see and use words. Having words in full view suggests having a word wall. Peha (2003) states that word walls are an absolute necessity. He supports and encourages the use of word walls because it serves as a memory aid for students. Word walls are useful and they provide a systematically organized collection of words displayed in large letters on a wall or other large display placed in the classroom. They are a tool to use, not just display. Words are designed to promote group learning and be shared by a classroom of children. (McCarrie, Pinnell, & Fountas, 2000)

Having words on word walls is not enough; these words need to be explicitly taught. Patricia Cunningham (2000) suggests one strategy that is effective for

teaching the high-frequency words is doing a word wall. Cunningham explains that ‘doing’ a word wall is not the same thing as having a word wall. Simply having a word wall might mean putting words up in the classroom and telling students to use the word wall is not enough. Reading educators, as well as researchers including Cunningham, have noted that struggling readers have difficulties with words like *was, saw, of, for, from, they, that, with, will*. Many of these words have no meaning, are not logically spelled, and look similar. No wonder beginning readers get confused. Therefore, words must be taught. Struggling readers cannot use the word wall because they do not know the specific word and do not know which word is which. Patricia Cunningham’s book, *Classrooms That Work, They Can All Read and Write*, gives six suggestions for ‘Doing the Word Wall.’ (p. 136):

1. Be selective and “stingy” about the words put on the wall; limit the words to those common words that students need in writing.
2. Add them gradually – five a week (less for younger students).
3. Make them accessible by putting them where everyone can see them, writing them in big black letters and using a variety of colors so that the constantly confused words (for, from, that, them, etc.) are in different colors.
4. Practice the words by chanting and writing them because struggling readers are not usually good visual learners and cannot just look at and remember words.
5. Do a variety of review activities to provide practice so that the words are read and spelled instantly and automatically, and

6. Make sure that Word-Wall Words are spelled correctly in any writing the students do. (p. 136)

Patricia Cunningham (2000) emphasizes the benefits of having word walls and utilizing the words on it. The benefit of having a word wall is that it provides students with an immediately accessible dictionary for the most troublesome or highly used words. Because the words are added gradually, stay in the same spot forever, are alphabetical by first letter, are visually distinctive by different colors of paper, and because of the daily practice of finding writing and chanting these words, most students learn to read and spell almost all of the words. With explicit instruction and daily repetition of sight words, reading and writing sight words becomes automatic. As a result, students can focus their attention on the less frequently used words and construct meaning as they continue to read and write (Cunningham, 2000).

Lucy Calkins (2003) gives suggestions for the instruction of high-frequency words. The process Calkins recommends to anchor high-frequency words is to: look at the word, study it, make a mental picture of it, write it down, check it, and if you forget a word, look up at the word wall.

For differentiating instruction of sight words, there are many activities to help students. For example, for *auditory learners*, have students record themselves on cassette tape, reading the words and their meaning or translations. For *kinesthetic learners*, allow students to play games that use their entire body or allow movement. For gifted learners, allow students to research historical origins of words creating a record of derivations (Fountas, 2001).

When students work with word walls, the words become secure in their long-term memory allowing quick and easy access. Word walls also encourage students to make connections between words. Students learn to use the words to construct knowledge in conversations and activities. Word walls also provide a visual record of skills taught and content studied. They are powerful tools if and when words are discussed and analyzed with students before they are posted on the wall (Routman, 2003). A visual record of sight words has an effect on word identification. Word identification refers to the strategies or skills readers use to figure out words when reading and spelling. Word identification includes phonic analysis, structural analysis, context clues, and sight word recognition, use of configuration and picture clues. The Department of Education, (2008) gives a list of benefits for using word walls and gives strategies for students to use for the identification words:

- Recognizing or identifying whole words. For example, *like*, *have*, *their*, and *of* have an irregular spelling pattern.
- Using configuration clues. The distinct shapes of words can help readers figure them out. Unusual shaped words such as *elephant* are more likely to be figured out than words with similar configuration such as *was* and *saw*.
- Morphology or structural analysis. Recognizing the formation of words using roots, prefixes, and suffixes. For example, begin with simple words such as *play* and *playing* and then move to complex words such as *agree* to *dis-agree-ment*.

- Context clues. Understanding the surrounding words, sentences, or even paragraphs to help students read and understand unfamiliar words. (Department of Education, 2008. p. 1)

The ability to read and recognize words automatically empowers students and allows them to focus on comprehension and meaning, rather than spending time to sound out each word. Cunningham's (2005) interests center on the ability to recognize high-frequency words automatically and quickly. She connects reading fluency with comprehension by means of high-frequency words. Therefore, readers must recognize each word as quickly and effortlessly as possible so that they are able to pay attention to the more mentally demanding task of understanding what they are reading. Cunningham stresses the importance to instruct high-frequency words, especially at an early age. She repeatedly emphasizes that students need to learn to read words automatically in order to focus more attention and energy for decoding unknown, less frequent words and more importantly, for processing the meaning of text (Cunningham, 2000).

### Connecting Sight Words to Reading

Learning to read is a dynamic process that represents the culmination of years of literacy experiences and the integration of multiple skills and processes. Letter-identification, letter-sound knowledge, and phonological awareness are necessary prerequisites for learning to read (Ritchey, 1998). Moreover, there is convincing evidence to suggest that an emphasis on alphabetic skills and phonological awareness

positively influences both phonemic awareness and word-reading outcomes (Oudeans, 2003, Schneider, W., Roth, E., & Ennemoser, M. 2000). In addition, students need to practice phonemic awareness activities, learn decoding strategies, build a *sight* vocabulary, understand correct sentence *structure* and meaning, and have plenty of opportunity to apply (read) what they are learning in leveled text. Knowing high-frequency words is a key component in helping students make sense of what they read and is essential for reading fluency.

For decades, researchers have agreed that when students know 200-300 different basic sight word (depending on grade level), then they are said to know approximately two-thirds of all the words they encounter. Basic sight words are high-utility words recognized instantly by the reader. For example, *window* is not used nearly as frequently as *the*; therefore, *the* would be on a basic sight word list, but *window* would not. Thus, fluent readers generally have the same basic sight words of 200-300 most frequently used words in the English language. Even after Dolch's (1941) research, others have recognized the importance of knowing sight words. In the early 1970s, research conducted by Carroll, Davies, and Richman (1971) looked at the top 25 most frequently used words in the English language, and they found that half of the words have irregular vowel patterns; that is, they do not sound the way they look. Another reason to explicitly instruct students in high-frequency words is that the top 25 high-frequency words account for approximately one-third of the total number of words in texts that students must recognize to become successful readers. (Carroll, Davies, & Richman, 1971)

Since reading is a process and an integration of multiple skills, a fluent reader must become proficient at several core tasks, which can be divided into at least six areas. Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA, 2001) identifies the areas in a report titled: *Literacy Behaviors of Preschool Children Participating in an Early Intervention Program*. These include the following:

- (a) Alphabet knowledge: The relationship between letters and sounds.
- (b) Phonological awareness: An understanding that spoken words are composed of a series of sounds.
- (c) Expressive and receptive language: Receptive language skills measure students' knowledge of semantics, syntax, and pragmatics, which includes the students' ability to comprehend.
- (d) Verbal memory: The ability to retain information that has been presented orally in one's working memory.
- (e) Concepts of print: Includes directionality, reading from left to right, the concept of the word and punctuation, and an awareness of environmental print (signs and logos).
- (f) Early writing: Such as drawing, scribbling, and invented spelling have been shown to correlate with later writing skills. (CIERA, 2001. p 2-4)

Alphabetic knowledge is premier in understanding letters and sounds with the relationship of words. Torgesen (2004) recommends an identification procedure involving administering a test of knowledge of letter names or sounds. A measure of letter knowledge is the best single predictor of reading difficulties.

Another important process in reading skill is phonemic awareness, which is the ability to articulate the sounds of a spoken word in order. This includes the segmenting of words into their individual phonemes in correct order of words. Schneider, et al., 2000 systematically taught phonological awareness skills to a group of low-income kindergarten students who were exhibiting reading weaknesses. The researchers compared their skill levels with a control group who exhibited no literacy deficits. By the end of the study, the students in the experimental group nearly closed the performance gap, and in some cases, outperformed the students from the control group.

An understanding of the alphabets and phonological awareness are equally as important to reading as oral language, which includes expressive and receptive language. It is apparent that oral language, reading words, and reading comprehension are intertwined to reading readiness. Speech-language pathologists are often the first professionals to diagnose students who are at risk of developing reading disabilities. For example, Foster (2007) took a closer look at why students have reading difficulties. During the years of 2000-2003 in Foster's school district, he reported that up to 52 percent of all students who were identified as having a learning disability in reading had previously been identified as having speech-language impairment – a finding that is consistent with other reports (e.g. Stothard, Snowling, Bishop, Chipchase, & Kaplan 1998).

Bailey, Borczak, and Stankiewicz, (2002) indicate that the first factor affecting the success of student readers and writers is the lack of experience with language. They add that students must have a strong verbal language developed

which is based in phonemic awareness (Bailey et al., 2002). Therefore, the ability to read and communicate with others plays an important role with language acquisition, and in turn, builds on the reading process.

The English language is complex with its many spelling and grammatical rules, and Gentry (2004) acknowledges the difficulties when he compares English with Italian. Gentry explains that in English, the alphabetic principle is complex with many foreign spellings and many spelling combinations in addition to a large vocabulary and arbitrary spelling patterns which all make reading that much more difficult compared with other languages. He further explains that a primary cause for higher numbers of people with literacy problems in United States, as compared with Italy, was due to the large number of sounds and spelling combinations that the English Language uses. He specifies that the English language has 44 sounds and 1,120 different spelling combinations for these sounds (Gentry, 2004). Therefore, reading becomes a challenge.

Since reading is a process, these six areas for reading readiness are essential for reading. The National Reading Panel, 2000 and other researchers highlight the importance of alphabet knowledge, phonological awareness, expressive and receptive language, verbal memory, concepts of print, and early writing for forming the basis for pre-literacy and early-literacy behaviors that can be observed in children between the ages of four and five years old. Researchers agree that these six components must be explicitly taught. Therefore, the evidence indicates that understanding the relationship between letter and sounds, letter sounds with phonological blending, and segmenting is critical for acquisition of beginning word-reading skills.

Sister Mary Karen Oudeans, PhD. is chair of the Department of Special Education at Silver Lake College, Wisconsin. Oudeans' (2003) research investigated fundamental reading readiness skills and looked at integrating these specific skill components. Oudeans defines integration as the arrangement of separable components skills into a whole, such as the acquisition of letter sound, segmenting, and blending. Her research investigated the sequence, or the order for integrating these components skills. Oudeans' research examined which component skills must be taught to mastery before another is introduced and which skills can be taught at the same time. For the other outcomes, the order in which the component skills are taught to mastery may not matter. Oudeans used two examples: one task was shoe tying (order specific) where the sequence and order of tasks matter and mastery of one skill follows the mastery of the other. The second task was telling time where the sequence or orders in which skills are taught are not dependent on the other skill in order to tell time. Her research identifies the relationship between sets of activities into four categories: successive, parallel, integrated, and non- integrated.

Oudeans defines the relationship between sets of activities, when she explained each category. She states:

The relationship between sets of activities that is successive requires one set of activities to follow another set of activities, while a parallel relationship requires the two sets of activities to be taught within a specified period of time. The relationship between integrated sets of activities requires the two sets of activities to be systematically linked with explicit connections made between component skills. In contrast, the relationship between non-integrated

sets of activities is discrete and kept separate from each other; that is, the two sets of activities are not linked. Naturally, there are various combinations of these four categories when integrating the sets of activities during instruction. (2003. p 261)

Oudeans (2003) investigated the various combinations of instruction and then compared results in “parallel, integrated, or parallel, non-integrated [instruction]” (p. 258). She explained that parallel integrated activities were taught in a given amount of time with connections being made between activities and skills. Parallel non-integrated activities were taught in a given amount of time as well; however, no connection was made between activities and skills. Oudeans chose five kindergarten classrooms in the Pacific Northwest to serve as participants in her study. Her findings show that both parallel integrated and parallel non-integrated instruction were effective in teaching letter names and sounds. However, when students had to apply that letter-sound knowledge to the decoding of words beyond the initial phoneme, parallel integration instruction students were able to read more words per minute than those who received parallel non-integrated instruction. In fact, throughout the course of the study the parallel integrated students consistently performed better during progress monitoring.

The purpose of Oudeans’ study was to determine which sequence of integrating alphabetic skills and phonological awareness best facilitates word-reading performance for kindergarten children with low phonological awareness skills.

Oudeans (2003) stated: “The importance of an instructional sequence that

systematically and explicitly links letter sound correspondences and phonological blending and segmenting cannot be overemphasized.” (p. 278) Based on the results of her research, she continues to emphasize the importance of including a 15-minute instructional period that systematically and explicitly link letter-sound correspondence instruction with phonological blending and segmenting for securing sight words. Therefore, focusing on these components helped kindergarten students make sense of the alphabetic writing system when learning to read. This was more effective in strengthening early reading and phonological awareness skills.

Stuart (2000) concurs with Oudeans. Stuart highlights the importance of phonological awareness and knowledge about the alphabet to successfully initiating into printed-word recognition. Stuart also adds that this recognition is possible due to extending their influence to include sight vocabulary development as well as the establishment of phonological recoding procedures.

## Word List

There are many commercial word lists, and the question is, which list should be used? Consider first a historically prominent reading fluency intervention. Edward W. Dolch (1942) compiled the Dolch Basic Sight Word Test, consisting of what he called not the words of highest utility but very common service words. Dolch believed that children should be taught the words most often encountered in text as sight words or words they should recognize automatically. Through his research, he identified 220 words that made up from 50 to 75 percent of text children read, with these being mostly functional words. Pressley (2005) stated that Edward Dolch had a

view of reading and reading instruction that was far ahead of his time. The Dolch list is the only vocabulary list to make a distinction between types of words. This list includes all grammatical categories except nouns.

Although, there are slight differences in these lists, most of the lists contain the same core words. Therefore, any word list will produce similar results. Carol and Peter Riech (2001) investigated several basic word lists. They found high levels of agreement among published lists. Consequently, it is beneficial for educators to integrate high-frequency words as part of reading instruction. Given the emphasis on reading at the word level is the most popular conception of fluent reading, it makes sense for all concerned with reading education to be thinking about what words students are learning to read.

Even though dictionaries are filled with thousands of words, only a small number of these words occur frequently in the materials we read. It is repeatedly found that word recognition abilities are the single best class of discriminations between good and poor readers. Merritt, DeLosh and McDaniel, (2006) emphasize that words high in natural language occurrence are better recalled than words low in natural language. This is probably one of the best known and most accepted finding to emerge from literature. Saint-Aubin and Poirier (2005) make a similar comment when they correlate the immediate recall of high-frequency words. They agree that high-frequency words are better recalled than low-frequency words. In other words, common words are remembered better than uncommon words. Therefore, there is strong evidence to incorporate explicit instruction of high-frequency words.

Explicit instruction is needed because many of the high-frequency words do not follow commonly taught phonics rules and cannot be sounded out such as in the word *would*. Then, the only way a student is able to read these words is to recognize them by sight. A second reason is that knowing words by sight makes a student a faster and more fluent reader. An additional reason to teach high-frequency words by sight is that while many of these words alone do not carry much meaning, for example *of* and *a*, they do affect the meaning of a sentence and help make it understandable. Although practicing high-frequency words in isolation is beneficial, it is just as important to allow students to practice reading these words in context. To aid in visual memory, it is essential to have a word wall to display words with daily practice of the targeted words. The goal is to provide students with a visible means for finding the conventional spelling of a particular word.

The ability to read well is important for educators as well as students. Teachers want all their students to be able to read fluently and use a variety of skills to help them comprehend what is read. It is the hope of this researcher to use high-frequency words to enhance fluency in kindergarten.

The next chapter will focus on the method for this research and take a closer look at the participants and design of this research. The subsequent chapters will examine the effectiveness of teaching kindergarten students sight-word vocabulary to support a phonics-based reading program.

## Chapter III

### Method

#### Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine the effectiveness of teaching kindergarten students sight word vocabulary to support phonics based reading program. There were two objectives: to increase recognition of high frequency words, or words that appear often in written form. The other was to determine whether the expectation of ten words per month was a reasonable goal, and the time frame of when to begin implementing sight word vocabulary instruction. This action research study balanced phonics with the use of sight words for reading instruction.

#### Participants

Participants included children from two kindergarten classes from an urban school system located in the city of Rochester. The total sample for this study consisted of twenty-four students. Two groups of twelve students were randomly selected: twelve students for the experimental group from one class, and twelve for the controlled group from the other class with the same demographics.

#### *Procedures*

I wanted my students to become fluent readers, to read words quickly and accurately. This required time to teach high frequency words and to balance a phonics reading program with sight words. Therefore, explicit instruction of high frequency

words was implemented in my kindergarten classroom. Twelve students were randomly selected as the experimental group.

The experimental group was taught two sight words for 20 minutes three days a week, with a total of ten words by the end of one month. Words were presented using the 'overlearning' procedure: 1, 2; 1, 2, 3; 1,2,3,4. For example: *the (1), to (2)*; *the (1), to (2), and (3)*; *the (1), to (2), and (3), he (4)*: and so on. Sight words were obtained from already existing word lists and from poems and stories read in class. The controlled group of twelve randomly selected students was not explicitly taught sight words.

Each new sight word was introduced, written on the board by the teacher, read to the students, and copied on paper by the students. Students first clapped and chanted the new word, saying the letters of the new word, followed by tracing the new word in air. After saying the word, chanting each letter, and air writing, the students wrote down the new word on the back of their bellwork. To reinforce the new word, a few of the students were selected to use the new word in a sentence. After the words were introduced and posted on the word wall, the students took turns finding the word in written form, from the morning message.

During small guided reading groups, the students practiced reading flash cards and read books with the focused word. For additional support, students were also given one page of three-four sight words to read and write for homework per week.

#### *Instruments for study*

Before the study began, I tested students in the experimental and the controlled group individually for their recognition of sight words. A list of 10 words

was written on flash cards and students' ability to identify any of the sight words on the flash cards was assessed. The results were recorded and compared with the control group. The pre- and post- assessments of the sight words were completed by the teacher. (See Appendix A) Twenty - four students were individually assessed on ten sight words.

Each student was also assessed on phonemic awareness- the ability to identify beginning, middle and ending sounds (See Appendix C)

Students were also assessed on the alphabetic principle: the ability to identify the alphabet and the sound each letter makes. (See Appendix B)

Twelve students from the experiment group and twelve students from the controlled group were involved during the one month time period. A summary of the results can be found in the next chapter.

## Chapter IV

### Results

The purpose of this action research was to build fluency by using high frequency words in kindergarten. Students were taught two sight words for 20 minutes three days per week, for 10 words during the month of March 2008. The results were then compared with a control group that had not been explicitly taught high frequency words. Both groups were given a pre-assessment as a baseline to determine if the students were able to read any of the targeted sight words.

Students from the experimental and control groups were tested on word identification from the pre-assessment, a teacher-made high frequency word list. The number of correctly identified words was recorded. The pre-assessment was administered before any explicit instruction was given.

The following data represents the number of sight words read correctly, before and after the intervention. If the student was unable read the target word, a '0' was placed next to the word. If the student was able to read one word, the number '1' was placed next to the word. For example, for the word '*the*' (for the pre-test) one student was able to read the word. and later on, twelve students were able to read the word after the intervention. Likewise, the number '2' represents two students able to read the targeted word. If all twelve students were able to read the sight word, then a score of 12 would appear in the box. Data from the pre- and post- assessment appear on the following page.

**Table 1: Pre and Post Assessment of Sight Words**

High Frequency Word	Experimental Group			Control Group		
	Pre	Post	Difference	Pre	Post	Difference
the	1	12	+11	1	7	+6
was	1	11	+10	2	2	0
are	0	12	+12	2	0	-2
your	0	11	+11	0	1	+1
little	1	12	+11	1	7	+6
said	0	12	+12	1	2	+1
this	1	12	+11	1	1	0
there	1	11	+10	2	0	-2
when	0	11	+11	1	0	-1
have	1	10	+9	2	7	+5

Table 1 identifies the ten high frequency words used for this action research study. The table shows that all experimental group students read all 10 words in the post test, while the control group identified only seven of the 10 words. The experimental group, of twelve students was able to correctly read the words: *the*, *are*, *little*, *said*, and *this*. These twelve students correctly read five out of ten words. From the control group, seven students were able to read the words, *the*, *little*, and *have*. The average difference for the experimental group is 10.8 words per student, as compared with the average difference of the control group of 1.4 words per student. Students from the experimental group gained an average of 9.4 words more than the control group.

Before and after this action research study, students in the experimental group were evaluated through a triangulation of assessments. They were assessed on the

1) alphabetic principle (the ability to identify letter sound), 2) phonemic segmentation (the ability to identify beginning, middle and ending sounds), and 3) ten high frequency words.

Table 2, which follows, represents the results of the pre-and post- data analysis of three subcomponents: sight words, phonemic awareness, and alphabet sounds. All three assessments are the results from the experimental group.

**Table 2: Experimental Group Summary Statistics of Measures**

Student	High Frequency Word (10 words)		Phonemic Awareness (26 sounds)		Alphabet: letter sound identification (26 sounds)	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
A	0	7	12	10	2	26
B	0	10	16	26	12	26
C	0	10	16	24	9	25
D	6	10	20	26	16	26
E	0	10	12	26	13	26
F	0	8	9	23	2	24
G	0	10	10	26	3	26
H	0	10	13	23	16	26
I	0	10	10	26	7	26
J	0	10	26	26	15	26
K	0	9	10	20	17	25
L	0	10	15	23	15	26
Mean	.50	9.50	14.58	23.25	10.58	25.67

The average sight word recognition before this intervention was .50 words in comparison with 9.50 words identified correctly after the intervention, for the difference of nine words. For the ability to distinguish beginning, middle and ending sounds (phonemic awareness), out of 26 different sounds, initially, there was an average of 14.58 sound- discriminations identified by the experimental group. After the intervention 23.25 sounds out of 26 sounds were correctly identified. There was an increase in the average of 8.67 letter sound identifications. There was also an increase in the ability to recognize the alphabet and the letter sounds. There was an increased difference of 15.09 in letter sound recognition after the intervention.

Table 3, the final table, is the comparison of sight words from the control group and the experimental group after the intervention. This data is relevant to the intervention, because the information reflects this action research study of building fluency by using high frequency words. Table 3 reveals the data of this intervention and it is found on the following page.

**Table 3: Post Test Assessment of Sight Words**

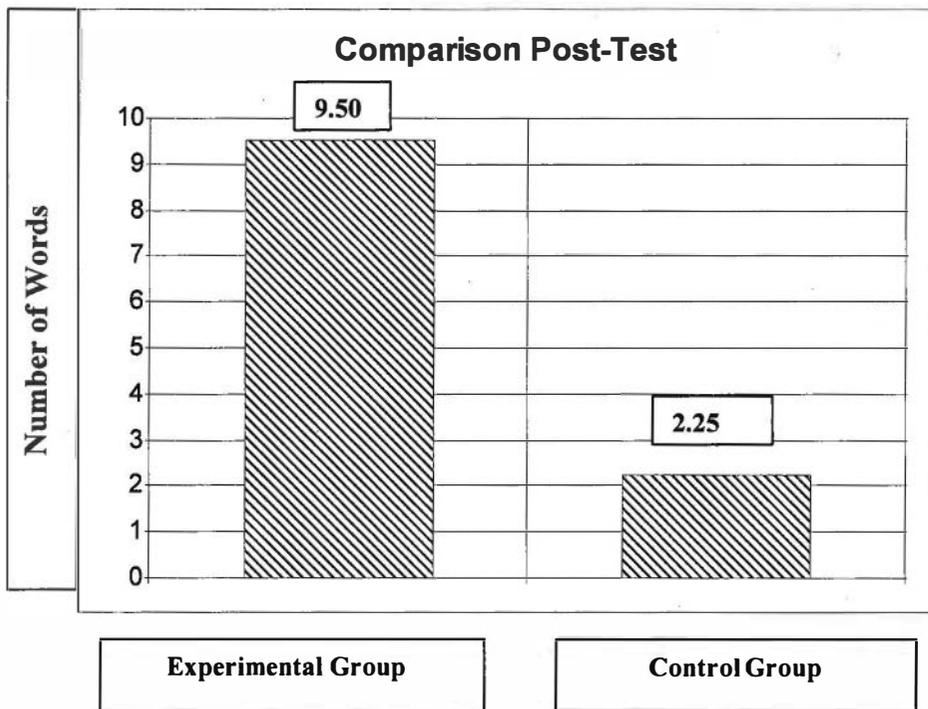


Table 3 represents the average word gain after the intervention for the experimental and control group. There was an increase of word recognition by the control group of an average of 2.25 words per student, in comparison with 1.08 average words for the pre-test. The average of words recognized by the experimental group was 9.50 words after the intervention. In the experimental group, the average word identified before the intervention was 13 total words with an average of .50 words per student, and after the intervention total words identified was 114 with an average of 9.50 words per student. Therefore, an average gain by the experimental group was 9 words per student for one month for this intervention. In comparing both groups, after the intervention, there was a difference of 7.25 words over the control group in just one months time.

In the pre-test for the control group, the number of words read before the intervention was a total of 13 or .92 words for 12 students. For comparison the experimental group, six words were read correctly prior to the intervention, as compared with 114 words or an average of 9.50 words.

I observed that my students were becoming aware of words in sentences. Whenever a student recognized a word that they were able to read they would say, "That word is \_\_\_\_\_." One student came into school and said, "I saw the word 'the' in my Bible." Also noteworthy, as my students were becoming word conscious, I observed that some were able to recognize high frequency words within words, such as the word *and* in the word *stand*.

At the beginning of this intervention, only one out of the twelve students in the experimental group was able to recognize 60 percent (6 words) of the ten sight words from the flash cards without any explicit instruction from the experimental group. In the control group, there were two students out of the twelve students that were able to correctly identify sight words. One of the two students from the control group was able to read 9 words out of 10 words, or 90 percent of the words. Another student from the control group knew nine out of ten high frequency words or 90 percent. One other student was able to identify four out of 10 high frequency words.

## Chapter V

### Conclusions and Recommendations

The purpose of this action research was to build fluency of high frequency used words with kindergarten students. These words are referred to as high frequency words, or words known by sight. The rationale for use of a whole-word method, as opposed to sounding out each letter, is that students can learn to read whole words, and these words can be taught quickly. Some students found it difficult to learn through a phonic method and a number of high utility words are phonemically irregular, for example *was* and *of*, must be learned as whole words. Those students that need to pause and attempt to figure out most of the words they read tend to overload their memory. An additional reason for teaching sight words is that knowing the most commonly used words by sight will make a student a faster and more fluent reader. The goal for educators is to have students read fluently.

Teaching sight words provides students with practice in recognizing words that make up a very high proportion of the words found in beginning reading materials. Knowing the importance of these core words should help students read not only texts being used for reading instruction, but other beginning reading texts as well.

Based on the presentation and analysis of the data on sight word recognition, the students showed a marked improvement in reading skills. The students in the experimental group identified more high frequency words than the control group.

The students were successful in reading the words in isolation by means of flash cards and were able to identify them in context from a sentence.

The increased number of high frequency word recognition indicates that explicitly teaching kindergarten students high frequency words was beneficial, and appears to be part of a balanced literacy program that is highly effective. There are 100 most frequently used words that make up 50 percent of words that appear often in the materials we read. This research was designed to balance sight word reading with a phonics program. However, reading readiness skills are essential for the foundation of any early reading program which includes the understanding of the relationship of letters, sounds and words.

In kindergarten, the first half of the year was focused on reading readiness skills. The alphabetic principle of letter and sounds recognition was the first skill to be taught. Also, phonemic awareness skill is essential, because it lays the foundation for listening and expressing different sounds. Thinking and listening for the distinct sounds found in words in the beginning, middle and ending of words helps to secure high frequency words. Additionally, the identification of a word and the difference between a word and a sentence is also significant in order to pick out high frequency words from a sentence. Furthermore, the concepts of print were also introduced such as directionality, which is the ability to track print from left to right. Current findings suggest letter naming and other direct measure of letter-sound correspondences and phonemic awareness may have greater utility for supporting sight words. Therefore, by mid-year, students had a foundation to support the acquisition of sight words. Students who initially scored in the top 25 percent on these measures maintained their

relative position on all measures at the conclusion of the intervention. Students who scored high on the three subcomponents also scored higher on sight word acquisition as compared with students that scored lower on all subcomponents also scored lower on the identification of sight words.

The duration of this intervention was for one month. It is not known whether the students will maintain these ten high frequency words in the months to come. However, it is noteworthy that regular reinforcing of high frequency words and other sight words secures these words into memory to become sight words, which are read and recognized quickly.

Introducing sight words in the beginning of the school year might be helpful for students who enter kindergarten with reading readiness skills. However, introducing ten words per month may not be advantageous until mid-year, when foundations of reading readiness skills, such as the alphabetic principal and phonemic awareness are acquired to help anchor the sight words.

Would I implement high frequency words next year? Yes! In just one months time, students were able to identify 95 percent of the target words, in comparison with the control group. It is beneficial and advantageous to introduce high frequency words in kindergarten. Next year, in the beginning of the school year, I plan to introduce sight words initially, one or two per month. After students have a solid understanding of the relationship of letters and sounds, in addition to a foundation of phonemic awareness. I will then increase the number of sight words to one or two per week.

Due to this action-based research, there was an increase of the Developmental Reading Assessments scores, or DRA. Whether there is a correlation between increased high frequency words and DRA levels is a subject for further research.

For decades, researchers and educators have agreed that explicit instruction of high frequency words are beneficial for any reading program. This intervention appears to be beneficial in increasing the number of words recognized in one month by the experimental group. It would be interesting to calculate the number of words remembered and maintained by students by the end of the school year. Another point of interest would be whether high frequency words appearing in the beginning or in the middle of a sentence would have a higher retention rate. Further research could also be designed to see if students are able to recognize other words that comprise high frequency words, such as *stand* from the word *and*, or high frequency words which includes suffixes or prefixes such as *un-like-ly*. Since building fluency by using high frequency words proved to be beneficial, perhaps, investigating teaching high frequency words in phrases instead of one to two words per week, but connection the two words. For example, teaching such phrases as: *There are, this was, we have, and here is my*. These additional questions are for future research.

Prior to this action based research, I was under the impression that learning two new high frequency words per week would be challenging for kindergarten students to learn. However, the kindergarten students excelled and were successful with two words per week. The students averaged 11.4 words out of 12 words, or 95 percent correctly identified words. Initially, I thought my expectations for this research had been high for my students, and yet, they met and exceeded my

expectations. As a direct result of this action based research, more will be expected from the students and in turn, the students will be more accountable for their learning.

This research significantly changed my views regarding teaching and learning since the fall of 2007. The significant difference is the explicit instruction of high frequency words in conjunction with the use of a word wall. The students appreciated and made use of the resources provided in the classroom. This action research project has been a successful learning experience for both the students and the educators involved.

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# Appendices

**Appendix A**  
**Pre/Post Test Assessment**

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Place a mark (✓) on known words.

1. \_\_\_\_\_ the
2. \_\_\_\_\_ and
3. \_\_\_\_\_ to
4. \_\_\_\_\_ is
5. \_\_\_\_\_ at
6. \_\_\_\_\_ was
7. \_\_\_\_\_ my
8. \_\_\_\_\_ like
9. \_\_\_\_\_ as
10. \_\_\_\_\_ for
11. \_\_\_\_\_ it
12. \_\_\_\_\_ at
13. \_\_\_\_\_ are
14. \_\_\_\_\_ your
15. \_\_\_\_\_ my
16. \_\_\_\_\_ said
17. \_\_\_\_\_ this
18. \_\_\_\_\_ and
19. \_\_\_\_\_ here
20. \_\_\_\_\_ see

1. \_\_\_\_\_ the
2. \_\_\_\_\_ and
3. \_\_\_\_\_ to
4. \_\_\_\_\_ is
5. \_\_\_\_\_ at
6. \_\_\_\_\_ was
7. \_\_\_\_\_ my
8. \_\_\_\_\_ like
9. \_\_\_\_\_ as
10. \_\_\_\_\_ for
11. \_\_\_\_\_ it
12. \_\_\_\_\_ at
13. \_\_\_\_\_ are
14. \_\_\_\_\_ your
15. \_\_\_\_\_ my
16. \_\_\_\_\_ said
17. \_\_\_\_\_ this
18. \_\_\_\_\_ and
19. \_\_\_\_\_ here
20. \_\_\_\_\_ see

# *Letter/Sound Identification*

Name \_\_\_\_\_

✓ = Student knows letter and/or sound of letter

	Beg. Year		Mid Year		Mid Year		End Year			Beg. Year		Mid Year		Mid Year		End Year	
	L	S	L	S	L	S	L	S		L	S	L	S	L	S	L	S
Date																	
C									c								
A									a								
E									e								
D									d								
B									b								
H									h								
G									g								
J									j								
F									f								
I									i								
K									k								
M									m								
O									o								
L									l								
N									n								
P									p								
S									s								
T									t								
Q									q								
R									r								
X									x								
Y									y								
U									u								
W									w								
Z									z								
V									v								
<b>Total</b>									<b>Total</b>								

**Appendix C**  
**Phonemic Awareness**

Key: X - correct answers

O - incorrect / no answers

Skill : Beginning sound Tell me the sound you hear at the beginning of:	1	2	3	4
1. <u>b</u> at				
2. <u>f</u> un				
3. <u>s</u> at				
4. <u>t</u> op				
5. <u>r</u> at				
6. <u>m</u> ouse				
7. <u>c</u> ap				
8. <u>p</u> en				
9. <u>l</u> ike				
10. <u>d</u> uck				
Skill : Ending sound Tell me the sound you hear at the end of:	1	2	3	4
1. park <u>k</u>				
2. ten <u>n</u>				
3. toss <u>s</u>				
4. map <u>p</u>				
5. leaf <u>f</u>				
6. dog <u>g</u>				
7. doll <u>l</u>				
8. sat <u>t</u>				
9. word <u>d</u>				
10. tub <u>b</u>				
Skill : Middle sound Tell me the sound you hear at the middle of:	1	2	3	4
1. h <u>a</u> t				
2. p <u>e</u> t				
3. b <u>u</u> g				
4. t <u>o</u> p				
5. s <u>u</u> n				
6. p <u>i</u> g				