

First Words Fast: An Innovative, Compact, and Powerful Early Reading Curriculum

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First Words Fast

Abstract

In a test-driven educational environment, teachers see a great need for more engaging resources that produce the literacy results needed for students to thrive academically. In 2015, The National Assessment of Educational Progress reported that only 36% of fourth graders scored at or above the Proficient level of reading. This statistic was concerning because reading is an essential skill and has been shown to correlate with overall academic success. First Words Fast (FWF), an innovative reading program for beginning readers, provides a research-based curriculum that teaches sounds and sight words systematically and joyfully. The purpose of this paper was to provide an overview of FWF, which aims to provide a solid foundation of early reading skills among students in pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade.

Keywords: *early reading, literacy, phonics, sight words*

Introduction

FWF is an innovative reading program for pre-kindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade that is compact, fun, and fast. FWF serves as a platform for the accelerated teaching and reinforcing of fundamental reading skills with a specific focus on phonics and sight words. FWF functions as a powerful supplement to an existing curriculum or as a timely intervention for students who are not reading on grade level as they focus upon developing the necessary early reading skills that lead to independent reading success. Implementing the FWF

program takes about 30 minutes a day and includes an optional writing component.

FWF supplies teachers with effective, engaging materials and compelling, interactive methods (see Figure 1). By the end of 1st grade, FWF will have creatively introduced and taught the 26 letters of the alphabet, all 44 English language sounds and their common spellings, and an updated list of the most common sight words and other strategic words, The Latty List, which is comprised of 209 words in all. FWF's materials and methods fully equip teachers and motivate students as they focus upon developing

the necessary early reading skills that lead to independent reading success.

Jayne Latty, the creator of FWF, developed this system for teaching early reading skills while serving as a reading intervention teacher in an inner-city public school in Dallas, Texas. Drawing upon the dynamic energy of children and their connections with their

teachers, FWF uses an interactive system of teaching sounds and sight words that holds children's attention with picturesque sound cards, colorful word cards, reinforcement posters, and a cute mouse mascot. Moreover, the serious academic function of these engaging materials provides teachers with an invaluable instructional and intervention resource.

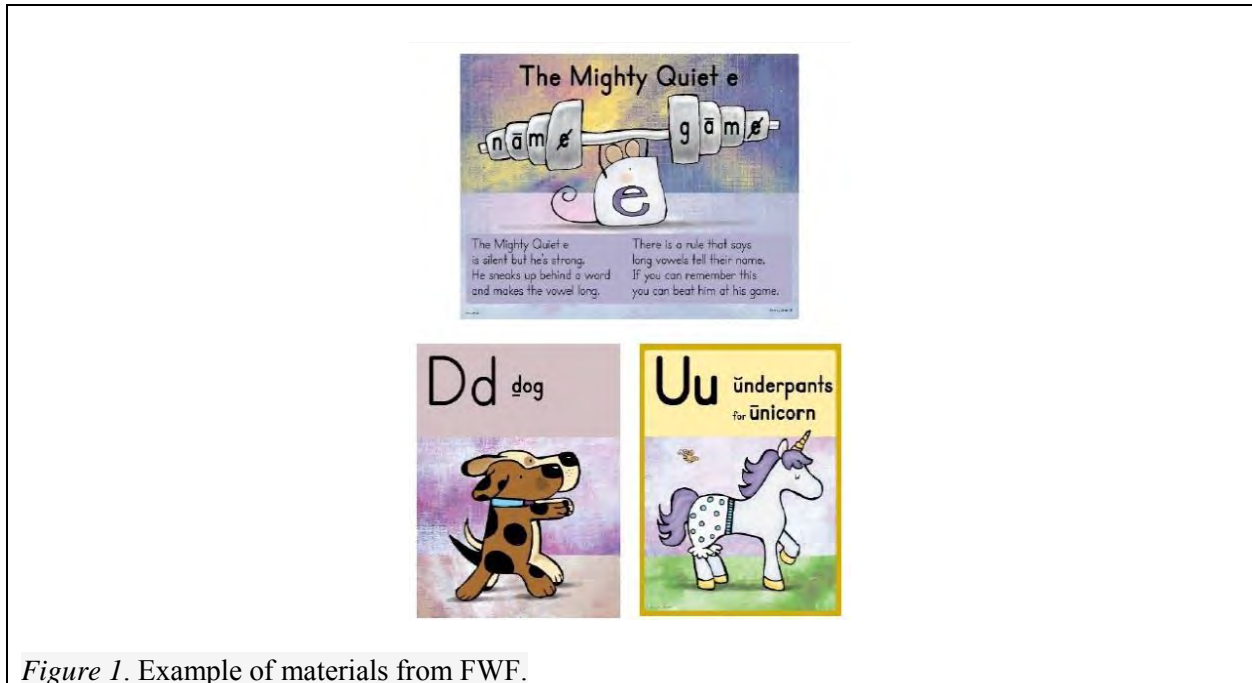


Figure 1. Example of materials from FWF.

Does FWF Work?

Pilot studies of FWF have been conducted in four Jamaican schools and produced favorable results. During the 2017-2018 school year, teachers in these schools participated in a comparative study that looked at students who received instruction using FWF and students who received instruction using a different, commonly used early reading curriculum. Students receiving the FWF curriculum were introduced more sight words, learned significantly more sight words, and outperformed students using the other curriculum, at every level.

What Makes FWF Successful?

Rooted in practical classroom experience and strong educational research, FWF has unlocked an innovative path to reading success. Decoding and sight word recognition skills are closely associated and reinforce each other. In FWF, teachers and students move easily from one interactive activity to another as children work with reading skills and concepts with both the teacher and their peers. FWF materials and methods foster a joyful environment, making learning more relevant and motivating to the children (Frymier & Schulman, 1995; Martin & Dowson, 2009).

Introductory activities stir children's curiosity and engagement. Mastery activities painlessly broaden and deepen the children's knowledge and commit sounds, words, and language concepts to permanent memory.

FWF's approach to teaching decoding skills and sight word recognition accelerates learning and provides a solid foundation for students to move towards independent reading. The National Reading Panel's (2000) findings determined that reading competence depends upon the skill of breaking words into sound units and the ability to combine sounds. Additionally, students who fail to move beyond decoding to instant word recognition remain poor readers who place so much energy into decoding that they struggle with comprehension (Gaskins et al., 1988). FWF's design provides innovative and interactive approaches that support development of these early reading skills among students.

The 3-Key Formula

FWF's 3-key formula provides the structure for its innovative approach to developing literacy. These keys focus on phonics, word families, and word associations.

Key 1 - Phonics

In FWF, each of the 44 sounds of the English language is represented by an image and color on a sound card that corresponds with the sound's spellings. As shown in Figure 2, these same images appear under the letters of the word cards, enabling children to visualize the sounds that the letters produce. Teachers participating in the pilot reported that this coding system provides children with more support for learning and blending sounds than other programs they have used. Children are even able to decode traditionally non-decodable words. These word cards are delineated by an icon that alerts them to the exception of established spelling patterns. Research has shown that all students, including students with phonological difficulties, learn better with a simple, less intensive system

(Shapiro & Solity, 2008). Tailored around the research, FWF's simple phonics system easily teaches only the most common alternate sound spellings, using the charming Copycats and Silent Partners.

Key 2 – Word Families

Teaching similar words together, like *cat*, *hat* and *sat*, makes learning words easier for children (Johnston, 1999). FWF applies this same logical strategy to teaching sight words. Sight words are introduced and grouped on an interactive word wall according to similarities. The interactive word wall serves as a graphic organizer that creates learning connections by underscoring similarities through the visual impact of physically aligning the shared letter sounds of words with their shared colors and picture cues (Ellis & Howard, 2007). Through a word's specific placement on the interactive word wall, children can explore similarities and reach mastery by meaningfully interacting with the material.

Key 3 - Word Associations

With the help of the interactive word wall, FWF features associations among words to reinforce learning (see Figure 3). For example, when the relatively simple words of *no*, *go*, and *so* are introduced with *know* at the same time, learning the more difficult word *know* becomes easier. The simpler word *no* is a mnemonic cue which further supports learning the more difficult homonym (Ehri, 2005). Along with grouping words according to sound on the interactive word wall, FWF creates meaningful text connections among them by strategically placing them near each other. For example, the word *ask* is positioned in front of the word *know*. Making such meaningful connections facilitates the process of learning (Brod, Werkle-Bergner, & Shing, 2013; Underwood & Weinstein, 2014). Moreover, creating meaningful text connections is a precursor to writing.

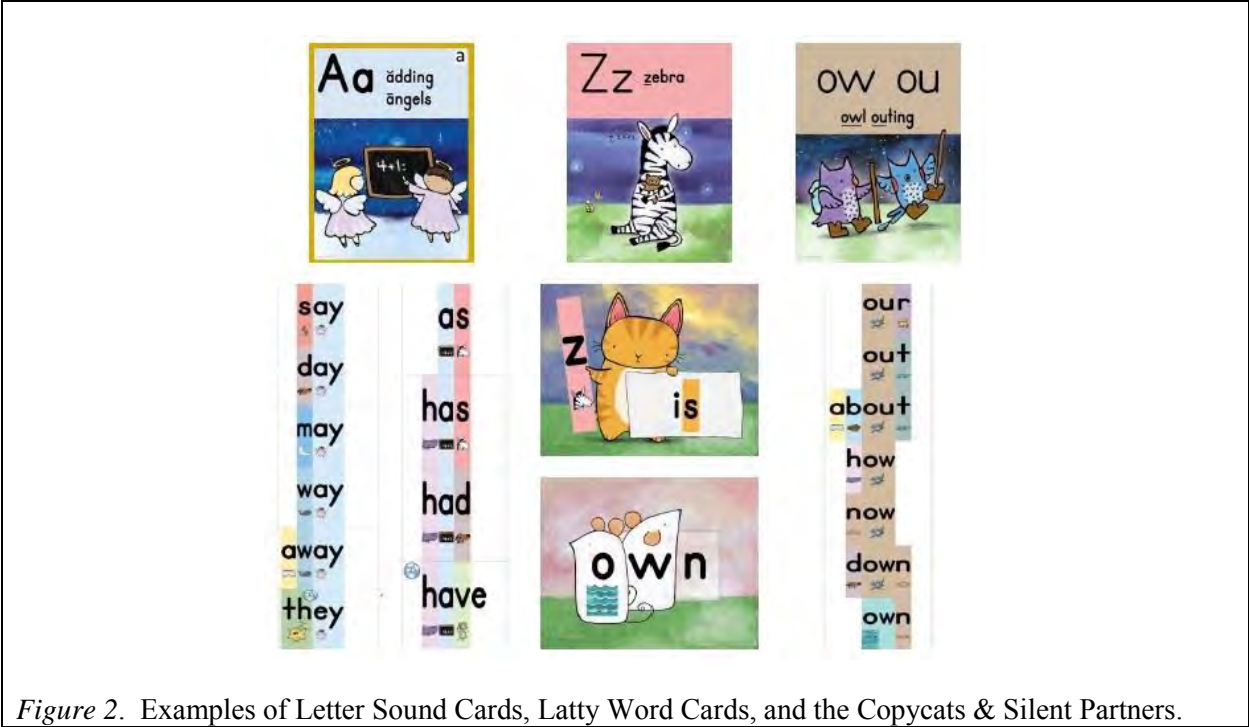


Figure 2. Examples of Letter Sound Cards, Latty Word Cards, and the Copycats & Silent Partners.

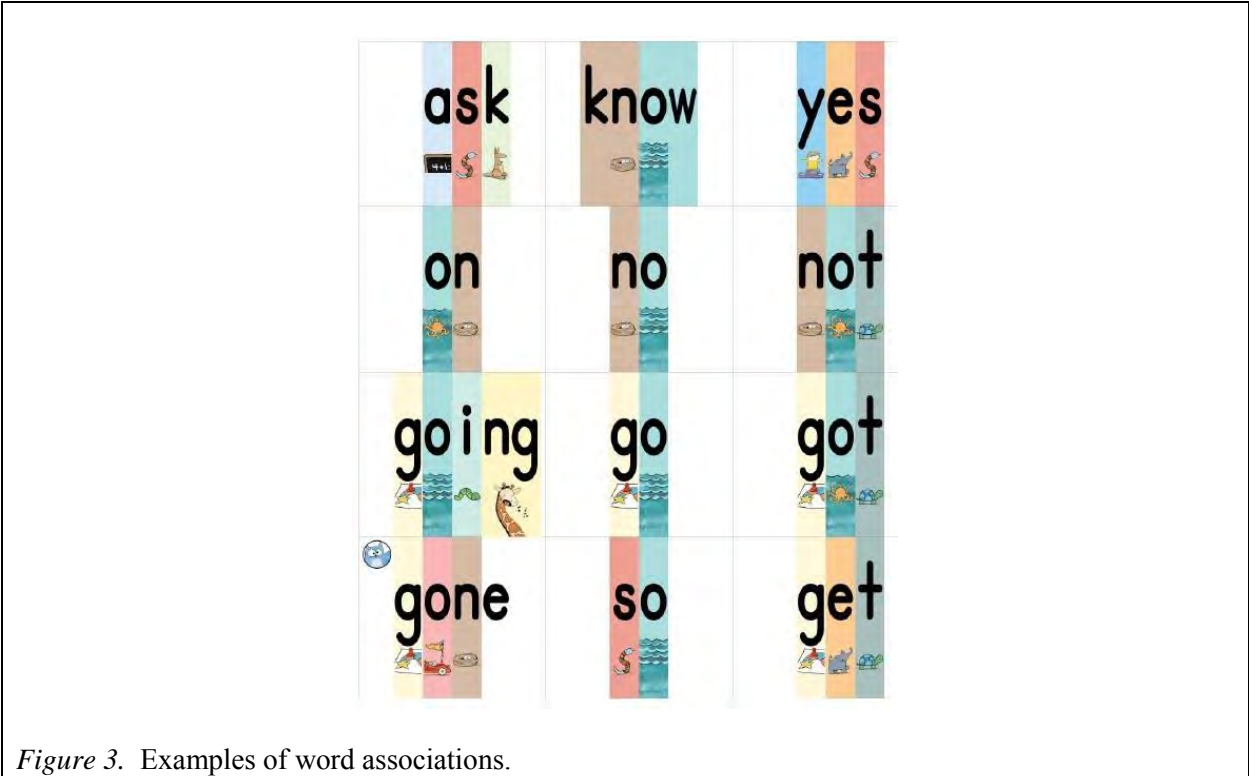


Figure 3. Examples of word associations.

The Latty Word List

Learning to recognize the most commonly used words, along with knowing basic sound spellings, equips children to read 90% of the words they will encounter while reading (Castles, 2016; Solity & Vousden 2009). Unfortunately, the commonly relied upon Dolch and Fry word lists are decades old. Language changes over time, and these word lists do not reflect current word frequencies.

Moreover, the Latty List combines the approaches of both Dolch and Fry by including the most common words specifically found in beginning readers and the most common words in general, respectively. The Latty List serves as the backbone of FWF, providing the core content for integrating both word and sound knowledge. FWF teaches the 25 most common words in the first six units, the majority of the words which make up the pre-kindergarten curriculum, and then repeated in kindergarten and 1st grade, accelerating the pace at each level. The kindergarten curriculum teaches a total of 71 words, and the 1st grade curriculum includes all 209 words. Committing these words to memory and learning the sound spellings that the Latty Word List contains puts children well on their way to reading independently.

Implementing FWF

Through its detailed lesson plans, FWF offers dynamic teaching strategies for each stage of teaching the concepts and skills that move children toward joyful, independent reading. All FWF lessons are designed around systematic progression, interactive learning, and discovering associations.

Systematic Progression

FWF's teaching objectives are broken down into eighteen units called Family Units. Each Family Unit focuses around groups of sounds and the sound spellings, words, and concepts connected to those sounds. The Family Units include detailed lessons that begin with

introducing the unit's letters, sounds, sound spellings, words, skills, concepts, and materials related to the unit objectives. The introduction phase is followed by lessons that move toward mastery of objectives. Eventually, the materials related to each unit are integrated into a permanent position on the interactive word wall.

Interactive Learning

FWF materials and methods provide teachers the resources for easily generating energetic interactivity among the teacher, peers, the materials, and unit objectives. FWF's interactivity encourages children to attentively engage with lesson objectives, thereby circumventing their tendency to check out mentally and emotionally. Setting the stage for classroom connectivity, teachers invite children to gather seated in front FWF's interactive word wall displays. Then, teachers focus the children on a lesson's objectives by using the materials and prompts to encourage children to make meaningful observations, identify associations, and practice their blending and reading skills.

For example, when introducing sound cards, teachers ask children questions that prompt them to fully explore the connections between the sounds and the pictures and activities represented on the cards. When introducing word cards, teachers ask questions that prompt the children to connect each sound spelling in the word with the helpful pictures that accompany the spelling. With the help of the pointer wand and Shara Story, FWF's mouse mascot, perched at the tip of it, teachers lead children to blending sounds and reading words.

Discovering Associations

FWF's materials and methods are specifically designed to help teachers guide children in forming associations between sounds and pictures, sounds and sound spellings, sound spellings and words, as well as associations among words. The design of each Letter Sound Card and Word Card, along with specific placement of the Words Cards on wall charts,

facilitate children's ability to identify connections.

Specifically, a process called Align and Combine uses wall chart placement and alignment of similar colors and images to help children see simple similarities among words and then to build on the recognition of the simple similarities to incorporate associations with more challenging words. Align and Combine is used not only in introductory stages, but as a method of engagement and review to help children develop instant recognition of sight words. The sound awareness honed through Align and Combine provides the basis from which children practice their blending skills.

Conclusion

A high quality, innovative reading program for teaching sounds and sight words to students in prekindergarten, kindergarten, and first grade is indispensable. FWF provides that innovation and quality with its systematic comprehensive approach and engaging materials and methods. Children become independent readers when equipped with foundational knowledge of phonics and the most basic sight words (Castles, 2016; Solity and Vousden, 2009). Additionally, when children acquire early reading skills, they are more likely to experience future competence with reading (National Reading Panel, 2000). As described in this paper, FWF provides a high-quality, innovative reading program that is needed in today's classrooms.

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