

Word Identification: A Teacher's Story



Pacific Resources for Education and Learning

Building Capacity Through Education

Written by the staff of the Pacific Communities with High-performance In Literacy Development (Pacific CHILD) project at Pacific Resources for Education and Learning.

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Hannah's Story

Hannah is a Pacific island grade 1 teacher in a local village school. She has established a 90-minute daily literacy block in which she focuses on literacy-related activities. During these blocks, she notices many of her students having difficulty reading words she thinks they should know by sight. She wants to help her students learn frequently used words so they can say them quickly when they see them in print.

Hannah realizes how meaningful it would be to learn which of the age- and level-appropriate frequently used words her students can identify in print. She knows this information is necessary to help her students learn how to construct meaning from text. However, before Hannah can begin to think about planning her lessons, she needs to find out which students need help learning how to learn new words.

Hannah decides to assess each student with a list of words that frequently occur in the stories she and the class read and write together. She notes the students' responses and records her observations of their behavior while attempting to read a word on the list. For example, Hannah records whether students give a nonverbal response, such as shrugging their shoulders to indicate they do not know the word, or whether they ask for help rather than making an attempt to read the word themselves. Once she has this information, she feels better able to plan effective lessons to meet the needs of each student in her class.

Throughout this booklet you will learn more about Hannah's story and her experiences creating a rich learning environment that enhances accurate and automatic word identification (WI) for young students. She strives to increase her range of skill and put into practice the strategies for helping her students learn how to learn. While reading, you may identify with many of Hannah's experiences. However, you will want to craft activities and learning experiences unique to your practice and the individual needs of your students.

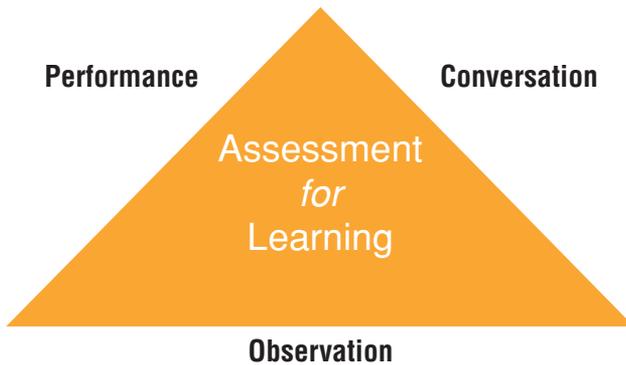
Word Identification

Hannah knows some words that frequently occur in children’s early reader texts are hard to decode. When students spend a lot of time trying to decode these words, they lose the meaning of the passage or phrase they are reading, thus affecting their ability to make sense of the text. If students memorize or learn these words with flexibility (i.e., knowing a word when it’s presented in a variety of contexts), they will be able to give more attention to making meaning of the print they are reading. Some words are structure or function words that have no referent (e.g., *the* or *was*); these words are usually more difficult for children to learn than other words that have concrete referents such as *dog* or *cat*. In English, many words often have an irregular sound-symbol correspondence and are difficult to decode, and therefore, are best learned as a total unit rather than as individual letters or word parts. For example, the words *said* and *the* are not easily decoded. However, Pacific languages may not have words that are difficult to decode. What is important is that students learn the most frequently occurring words, appropriate in their language and for their grade level, in an accurate and automatic way. WI is one part of becoming a fluent, proficient reader. Teachers may want to work with their local departments or ministries of education or language arts specialists to create a list of appropriate WI words for different grade levels.

Assessing WI

Hannah learns about her students’ WI needs and interests in a number of ways (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Three Pillars of Assessment



Performance

Hannah creates specific activities for her students to demonstrate which words they know and which ones they struggle with (e.g., word cards, a word wall, lists of high-frequency words, text reading). She uses this information to plan group and individual work specific to the needs of her students.

Observation

Hannah listens carefully as students read words in stories. She watches the students using the printed words on the walls in the classroom and as they write stories. She records what she has observed and uses that information when planning the next day's lesson. She tries to focus on each student at least once every 2 weeks.

Conversation

Hannah organizes a schedule to meet with each of her students at least once every 2 weeks to talk about what she has observed and to hear the student's perception of his or her own experience with words. They discuss what the student can do to learn the words automatically and become a more fluent reader.

Assessing Performance: Giving the WI Assessment

One specific performance activity Hannah uses for English WI is an assessment that can be found in the pocket inside the back cover of this booklet. Before trying this activity, read the instructions carefully and practice with another teacher or older child. Be sure to make one copy of the recording form per student assessed.

Interpreting and Reflecting on WI Information

After assessing, Hannah looks at the recording forms and writes down her thoughts. She identifies the following:

- Words that most of the students find difficult to learn—She plans a whole class mini-lesson on helping the students develop strategies for learning those words.
- Words that are difficult for a small number of students—She puts these students in a group to study the words together.
- Individual students who need her help with many words—She plans specific activities to meet each of their needs.

Hannah will observe regularly and reassess the students in a week, noting the changes in their performance in WI. She will regroup the students based on the new assessment information. For Hannah, this cycle is ongoing. She bases her planning on the changing literacy needs of the students in her classroom.

Planning for WI Learning: Resources

Once Hannah has reflected on the information from the individual WI assessments, she begins to think about how to plan instructional activities to help her students develop strategies for learning words. Hannah knows that a common strategy among teachers is to make a set of flash cards with

the target words for a lesson or activity, which can then be easily produced and used by her or classroom volunteers when working with students. However, Hannah wants to find additional ways to focus on WI during regularly scheduled literacy activities.

She begins by observing her students over a few days, exploring WI with them as part of the literacy block. She focuses on words from the story she reads to them at the beginning of the literacy block. She also asks students to use these words in writing activities that take place in the last 15 minutes of the block.

Teaching for WI Learning: Activities and Strategies

Hannah creates a classroom collection of children's early readers. These books are the easiest books to read and usually contain one to three lines of text, familiar words, enlarged print, and clear spacing between words. It is Hannah's plan to help her students attend to known or almost known words by pointing them out in the text and using them as she creates learning charts to use with the students.

Once Hannah establishes the students' interest in working with words, she varies the activities. The following are a few of these activities.

- Hannah creates a word wall in the classroom (organizing words by the letters in the alphabet) onto which students alphabetically place the words found in their writing and texts.
- Hannah provides time to sort and label various words, including the following:
 - Rhyming words
 - Words with the same initial or final letter(s)
 - Words with initial or final letter clusters
 - Words with the same number of syllables
- Hannah works with a few parents to create simple word cards using the words students need to learn. Some parents prefer to work in the classroom but others want to complete the work at

home. Their efforts benefit the students who can now play word games, such as bingo, in small or large groups.

- Students sort the word cards into categories and then identify the principle that created the category.

For example:

Red, blue, green, orange (principle: color words)

Say, play, day, clay (principle: words ending in *ay*)

- Students participate in making word ladders. Hannah starts with a word students know, then students add and remove letters to create a ladder of words.

For example:

it

sit

sip

slip

slipper

tip

tips

This example shows word relationship possibilities and may lead to many fun ways to sort words.

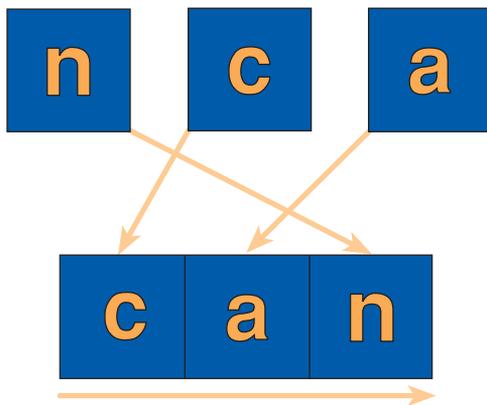
- Hannah and a few parents make letter cards to use when providing a model for a target word. This allows for the individual letters to be manipulated, broken apart, and reassembled so that students can read the word after working with it.

For example:

The word *can* is shown and read aloud correctly to the students:



The word *can* is then broken apart. Students must reassemble the word correctly, then read while demonstrating the left-to-right directionality of words using their finger:



A variation to using letter cards is to have students show only the first part of the word:



Or the last letter of the word:



- Hannah and her students prepare a pocket chart of words at the writing tables for students to refer to easily.
- Hannah writes words on the outside of small containers and sets them on shelves at eye level so students can easily see them.
- Hannah places a list of words in each student's writing folder (individual student folders used to store current writing projects, lists of topic ideas, alphabet charts, and resources used in daily writing) so students can refer to it easily and independently.

As Hannah focuses on WI, she becomes more aware of the importance of providing a print-rich environment where words appear in context. She uses simple statements, phrases, and questions to label the environment instead of supplying lists of words without meaningful context. Hannah realizes that the most meaningful learning experiences for students arise from the work they are engaged in rather than from isolated skills and drills.

Hannah begins to collect the daily news, recalling the key instructional activities or highlights from the day, and records the information on charts. Students can reread the daily news charts during free reading, when they are allowed to read print around the classroom. Hannah also collects recorded chants, songs, jingles, and news from special events for students to read.

Hannah is pleased to see the classroom environment she established for the students quickly becoming a stimulating print-rich room where students, teacher, and parents can engage in literacy learning.

Lessons Learned

Hannah has shared a number of important lessons regarding word identification:

- Teachers need to have a variety of resources and instructional strategies to address the WI needs of the students in their classrooms.
- Teachers will want to create opportunities to assess their students' knowledge about the most frequently occurring words in print.
- Teachers need to gather information about their students' WI strengths and needs.
- Teachers need to help students develop word learning strategies as an important part of becoming a fluent reader.
- Teachers need to be thinking not only about information they have gained, but how this information helps them in planning for the instructional needs of individual students.
- Students' most meaningful and powerful learning experiences arise from the work (e.g., actual lessons, activities, context) they are doing rather than from isolated skills and drills.
- Teaching for WI often requires teachers to be flexible in their planning, providing multiple ways for words to be learned in reading and in writing.

Like Hannah, you may want to try out strategies that are new to you. Be inquisitive and experimental. Risk working in new and innovative ways. Do not limit yourself by a single example. You may have many great ideas and strategies that are not included in Hannah's story.

Suggested Readings

Armbruster, B. B., Lehr, F., & Osborn, J. (2001). Put reading first: The research building blocks for teaching children to read. Kindergarten through grade 3. Washington, DC: The Partnership for Reading.

Iversen, S. (1997). A blueprint for literacy success: Building a foundation for beginning readers and writers. Bothell, WA: The Wright Group.

Pinnell, G. S., & Fountas, I. (1994). Guided reading: Good first teaching for all children. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.



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