Research Summary

The *Essential Sight Words Reading Program* (*ESWRP*) is a completely revised and updated version of the *Essential Sight Words Program* (*ESWP*, Sundbye, Dyck & Wyatt, 1979). Although the name has changed slightly, the revision retains the methods and procedures and much of the content from the original program. The purpose and rationale of the original program remains intact. Field tests conducted since 1979 show that the program is an effective teaching method for a wide variety of student populations, including struggling readers, students with learning differences, and English language learners.

The goal of *ESWRP* is to help readers experience the positive feelings of success while reading interesting books. The *ESWRP* is designed to teach automatic identification of 200 of the most frequently occurring words in the English language, words that are essential for successful reading. A pretest determines which of the 200 sight words a student does not know. The student then learns and practices those words through guided activity sheets and controlled-vocabulary books. Mastery tests and posttests are used to assess student progress. The twenty Level 1 books in *ESWRP* use sight words, pictured nouns, number words, and a few special words that are taught before students begin to read. The ten Level 2 books use sight words, number words, and up to 55 other words that are modeled for students before they begin to read. Students experience success by reading each word in the books without help.

Field Test of the Original Program

As the original version of the *Essential Sight Words Reading Program* was being developed, a field test was conducted using a portion of the *Essential Sight Words Program*, *Level 1* (Sundbye, Dyck & Wyatt, 1979).

Eleven teachers located in five different cities in Florida, California, New Jersey, and Kansas, used a portion of *ESWP* with a total of approximately 100 students. Teaching settings included four general education second-grade classrooms, three special education classrooms and resource rooms for children with learning disabilities, two special education classes for children with mental retardation, a general education first-grade classroom, a remedial reading pull-out program, and two special education classes for students with hearing impairments.

Each of the field test teachers selected about ten students who had not mastered more than 30 or 40 words, in the judgment of the teacher, to be taught in the field test. The field test materials were used to supplement ongoing reading instruction. The *ESWP* was taught by both teachers and paraeducators. Instruction was delivered in groups and individualized settings. All of these variations in delivery were reported as effective by the teachers.

Observations of students and teachers using the materials and oral and written evaluations provided by the teachers were used to assess the degree to which the materials were appropriate for students from the types of backgrounds and educational settings involved in the field test. In addition, data from the pretest, mastery tests, and posttest were collected and reported by the teachers. Complete data for 77 children from nine of the educational settings were reported. Results indicated:

- Eighty-one percent of the mastery tests (tested immediately after completing each activity sheet) were passed with 100 percent accuracy. An additional 11 percent were passed with 80 percent accuracy. The criterion for mastery was set at four of five trials correct. Thus, 92 percent of the words were mastered immediately following instruction on the words.

- Eighty percent of the words that were taught were recalled with 100 percent mastery (three of three trials correct) on the posttest.

- The overall results for students in general education classes varied little from those in special education classes. However, there was a slightly higher percentage of students in the special education classes who demonstrated total lack of recall for a small number of the words taught.

PCI Education

The field test editions of Books 1 and 15 were read by about half of the students involved in the field test. Many of the other books in *Level 1* were read in manuscript form by one to six students. Reactions to the books were generally quite favorable. When problems were discovered, the manuscripts were revised to eliminate them.

Data from all available sources regarding the field test materials indicated that the program was effective in accomplishing the purposes for which it was devised. In general, the teachers were pleased with the materials and liked the program, and they indicated that their students did, too. The teachers thought the program could be used effectively with students in remedial reading classes, students with learning disabilities, and students with mild mental retardation. They also recommended its use by general classroom teachers as a supplement to a basal reader program. They did, however, recommend that it not be used with students with moderate mental retardation who border on severe retardation or with students with learning disabilities who have no reading ability at all. The materials were reported to be suitable for use in classes for students with hearing impairments and for a child who had limited vision.

Eight-Month Study

A second grade teacher (Sanders,1985) conducted a study of the effects of *ESWP* on oral reading performance of poor readers in her classroom. Her purpose was to investigate the changes in oral reading response patterns, reading rate, and word recognition after instruction with *ESWP* over an eight-month period. She taught ten students in her own classroom who were reading below grade level, according to school district guidelines. The *ESWP* was used to supplement basal reading instruction. The teacher/researcher trained eight sixth-grade students in the school so that they could teach *ESWP* to the students individually. Data were collected by the teacher/researcher.

Results indicated that students learned about 0.89 words per session. Word recognition increased by about 15 percent and reading rate grew by ten percent for most students. The teacher/researcher made a number of observations that are instructive for future use of *ESWRP* as follows:

- The students did not tire of the activity sheets even though they participated in them on an average of three times per week for eight months.

- Sixth-grade tutors maintained a higher-than-usual level of interest in their tutoring role in this program compared with tutoring projects previously implemented by the teacher/researcher.

PCI Education

- The *ESWP* was exceptionally easy for teacher aides, parent volunteers, and older students to use because of its highly structured approach and readily available materials.

- The individualized aspect of the *ESWP* made it possible for every student involved to experience continuous success. The *ESWP* did not lead to the loss of interest and morale associated with less individualized supplemental programs used in the past.

- The *ESWP* was a beneficial product to help students develop essential sight word recognition as a supplement to basal reading instruction. Further, the approach of teaching sight words both in and out of context seemed crucial to successful mastery of the words and was a strength of the program.

Experimental Study Completed in 2005

Jane B. Pemberton, Ph.D., an Associate Professor at Texas Woman's University, conducted a study to assess the use of the *Essential Sight Words Program*, *Level 1* (Sundbye, Dyck and Wyatt, 1979) with elementary school students. Discussions with teachers of English language learners had suggested the *ESWP* would be useful when teaching this group of students. With this in mind, Dr. Pemberton included English language learners in her study.

Eight teachers of elementary school students in Texas and Arizona were involved in the study. The teachers were instructed to select students for the study who did not know many of the words in the *ESWP Level 1* word list. All students received one of two treatments as a supplement to their basal reading program. Half were taught sight words using the *ESWP Level 1* program as designed (experimental group), and half were taught sight words with the activity sheets only in order to hold the supplemental instruction constant for the comparison group. Teachers used the procedures during 10 to 30 sessions. Each session was held for 15 to 30 minutes.

Thirty-eight elementary school students participated in the study. Subgroups in the sample included 8 ELL (English language learners), 6 special education students (4 ELL/LD, 1 LD, and 1 with visual impairment), and 24 others (Caucasian, Hispanic and African-American).

ESWP Level 1 pretest and posttest scores of the number of essential sight words recognized by a student within a flash of half a second were used for the analysis. Treatments were *ESWP* full program and Activity Sheets only (comparison). Students in both groups gained in number of sight words known at the end of the study. The experimental group learned an average of 29.42 words, and students in the comparison group learned an average of 21.53 words. A more accurate comparison is to consider the number of sessions during which students received instruction.

PCI Education

Table 1 indicates that most students learned at least one word per session, and students in the *ESWP* full program learned about 25 percent more words per session than those in the Activity Sheet only group. The ELL students learned about as many words per session as other learners in the *ESWP* full-program group. Students with learning disabilities learned fewer words per session than other students, as might be expected. Even so, they learned sight words in both groups. The number of subjects in some cells was too small to test for statistical significance.

Table 1 Average Number of Words Learned Per Session

SUBGROUP	*ESWP* full program	Activity Sheets only
English Language Learners	(N=4) 1.65	(N=4) 1.09
Special Education Students (ELL/LD, LD, VI)	(N=4) 0.91	(N=2) 1.08
Others	(N=11) 1.60	(N=13) 1.12
Total	**(N=19) 1.37**	**(N=19) 1.10**

Analyzed another way, 25 percent of students in the *ESWP* full program group learned an average of more than 1.5 words per session. Fifty percent more students learned an average of one or more words per session for a total of 75 percent learning one or more words per session. Only 25 percent of students learned an average of less than one word per session, and most were students with learning disabilities. Ten students receiving the *ESWP* full program for 30 sessions had an average gain of 36.13 words or about 1.2 words per session. They were able to read an average of seven books. The results of this study indicate *ESWP* is an effective way to teach essential sight words to a variety of learners including beginning readers, students with special needs, and English language learners.

Case Study

A special education reading teacher with 20 years of experience at a variety of instructional levels used *ESWP* to teach junior high school students with multiple disabilities in a pull-out special program the spring of 2005 (Staab, P., 2005). The teacher felt *ESWP* was a good choice to teach basic sight words to students at this level because it incorporated what she understood to be research-based principles of word-recognition instruction. Some specific examples of success were:

• A girl with mild mental retardation needed to learn 29 words on the *ESWP Level 1* words list when the teacher began using *ESWP* with her. She achieved mastery on those words at a rate of about three words per week. The teacher required the student to read and write each word for mastery testing. Once mastered, the words were written on flash cards and used for periodic review. Testing at the beginning of the next school year indicated that she retained 97 percent of the words she had learned the previous year. This student developed such an attachment to *Tooth Problems* (*ESWP* Book 7) that she insisted on reading it for seven sessions in a row before she would consider reading another book.

• Students, who had years of struggle with reading, liked the predictable structure of the activity sheets. This was particularly true of three students with autism who used the program for two years. Two of these students disliked reading and had refused to do other reading activities in the past. However, they were willing to work on the *ESWP* activity sheets because they knew what to expect and had high success rates. They particularly enjoyed the "Circle and Say" section and the game or puzzle activities. One boy refused to read anything but *Stories of Bigfoot* (*ESWP* Book 17) for several class sessions.

Observations made by the teacher were:

• The format of *ESWP* was helpful because it made it easy for paraeducators, and other teachers who did not have strong reading instruction preparation, to support quality instructional practices. They could easily give students frequent, specific feedback about their attempts to read and spell sight words. The structure of the activity sheets made it easier for the teacher and paraeducators to collaborate about how to prompt students so they would have consistent, specific feedback about their reading performance.

• Students enjoyed reading the books in *ESWP*. Older students liked the pictured words, which seemed to remind them of computer icons and supported fluent reading. Students identified favorite books and chose to reread them.

PCI Education

- Student interest in rereading books provided both exposure to targeted sight words and repeated reading to increase fluency and rate.

Conclusions

This case study documents the effectiveness of *ESWRP* with different types of learners of various ages including beginning readers, struggling readers, older students in special education, English language learners, and others. The vast majority of students mastered one word or more per session regardless of their educational category. Students enjoyed reading the books and experienced success doing it. In general, teachers were pleased with the materials and liked the program.

There was a significant teacher effect. When teachers used the program as designed (including books), most children learned more words than when teachers used only activity sheets. Some teachers did not like the highly structured approach of *ESWRP*, while others felt that this was a strength of the program. The highly structured approach and readily available materials made *ESWRP* easy to use by untrained teachers such as parents, student tutors, paraeducators, and teacher aides.

The individualized aspect of the *ESWRP* was both an asset and challenge for teachers. When teachers were able to use the program with individual students, it was possible for the students involved to experience continuous success and motivation for reading. It was challenging for classroom teachers to find time to organize small groups of students with similar needs for group instruction.

While it was obvious that students could master sight words using only the activity sheets, it is not recommended that teachers use that methodology. Eliminating reading of the books will not help the student to develop reading rate and fluency which requires much reading of connected text. Using only activity sheets will not achieve the primary goal of *ESWRP* which is to help readers experience the positive feelings of success while reading interesting books.

PCI Education

References

Pemberton, J. (2005). Unpublished manuscript, Texas Woman's University.

Sanders, S. (1985). *A Study of the Effects of Combining Basals and a Sight Word Program on the Oral Reading of Second Grade Poor Readers*. Lawrence, KS: The University of Kansas, unpublished masters thesis.

Staab, P. (2005). *Case 1*. Personal communication.

Sundbye, N., Dyck, N., and Wyatt, F. (1979). *Essential Sight Words Program, Level 1*. Hingham, MA: Teaching Resources, Inc.

Related References

Allington, R. (1978). Word Identification Abilities of Severely Disabled Readers: A Comparison in Isolation and Context. *Journal of Reading Behavior, 10*, 409–416.

Baron, J. (1977). Mechanisms for Pronouncing Printed Words: Use and Acquisition In D. LaBerge and S. J. Samuels (Eds.), *Basic Processes in Reading: Perception and Comprehension*. Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates.

Biemiller, A. (1977–78). Relationships Between Oral Reading Rates for Letters, Words and Simple Text in the Development of Reading Achievement. *Reading Research Quarterly, 13*, 223–253.

Brescia, S. M. and Braun, C. (1977). Associative Verbal Encoding and Sight Vocabulary Acquisition and Retention. *Journal of Reading Behavior, 9*, 259–267.

Denburg, S. D. (1976–77). The Interaction of Picture and Print in Reading Instruction: Abstracted Report. *Reading Research Quarterly, 12*, 176–189.

Dolch, E. W. (February 1936). A Basic Sight Vocabulary. *Elementary School Journal, 36*, 456–460.

Faulkner, H. J. and Levy, B. A. (1994). How Text Difficulty and Reader Skill Interact to Produce Differential Reliance on Word and Content Overlap in Reading Transfer. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 58*, 1–24.

Fernald, G. M. (1943). *Remedial Techniques in Basic School Subjects*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc.

Foorman, B. R.; Francis, D. J.; Davidson, K. C.; Harm, M. W. and Griffin, J. (2004). Variability in text features in six grade 1 basal reading programs. *Scientific Studies of Reading, 8*, 167–197.

PCI Education

Francis, W. N. and Kucera, H. (1982). *Frequency Analysis of English Usage: Lexicon and Grammar*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Gibson, E. J. and Levin, H. (1975). *The Psychology of Reading*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

 Goodman, K. S. (1965). A Linguistic Study of Cues and Miscues in Reading. *Elementary English, 42*, 639–643.

Hargis, C. H. and Gickling, E. E. (May 1978). The Function of Imagery in Word Recognition Development. *The Reading Teacher, 31*, 870–874.

Hargis, C. H., Terhaar–Yonkers, M., Williams, P. C. & Reed, M. T. (1988). Repetition Requirements For Word Recognition. *Journal of Reading, 31*, 320–327.

Harris, A. J. and Jacobson, M. D. (1972). *Basic Elementary Reading Vocabularies*. New York: Macmillan.

Harris, A. J. and Jacobson, M. D. (1973–74). Some Comparisons Between "Basic Elementary Reading Vocabularies" and Other Word Lists. *Reading Research Quarterly, 9*, 87–109.

Harris, A. J. and Sipay, E. R. (1975). *How to Increase Reading Ability*. New York: David McKay Co.

Hiebert, E. H. (1999). Text Matters in Learning to Read (Distinguished Educators Series). *The Reading Teacher, 52*, 552–568.

Hiebert, E. and Fisher, C. (2005). A Review of the National Reading Panel's Studies on Fluency: The Role of Text. *The Elementary School Journal, 105*, 443.

Johns, J. L., and Higdon, J. E. (1973). Another Look at the Dolch List. *Journal of Reading Behavior, 5*, 140–144.

Johnson, D. D. (February 1971). The Dolch List Reexamined. *The Reading Teacher, 24*, 449–457.

Jorm, A. F. (1977). Effect of Word Imagery on Reading Performance as a Function of Reader Ability. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *69*, 46–54.

Katochwill, T. R.; Demuth, D. M. and Conzemius, W. C. (1977). The Effects of Overlearning on Preschool Children's Retention of Sight Vocabulary Words. *Reading Improvement, 14*, 223–228.

Kucera, H., and Francis, N. W. (1967). *Computational Analysis of Present-Day American English*. Providence, Rhode Island: Brown University Press.

PCI Education

LaBerge, D. and Samuels, S. J. (1974). Toward a Theory of Automatic Information Processing in Reading. *Cognitive Psychology, 6*, 293–323.

Lahaderne, H. M. (1968). Attitudinal and Intellectual Correlates of Attention: A Study of Four Sixth-Grade Classrooms. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 59*, 320–324.

Marchbanks, G. and Levin, H. (1965). Cues by Which Children Recognize Words. Journal of *Educational Psychology, 56(2)*, 57–61.

Mason, M.; Katz, L. and Wicklund, D. A. (1975). Immediate Spatial Order Memory and Item Memory in Sixth Grade Children as a Function of Reader Ability. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 67*, 610–616.

McDowell, E. E., and Youth, R. A. (1973). Effects of Discrimination Pretraining upon Intralist Similarity Phenomenon in Developing Beginning Reading Skills. *Perceptual and Motor Skills, 36*, 1039–1045.

Muehl, S., and King, E. M. (1967). Recent Research in Visual Discrimination: Significance for Beginning Reading. *Vistas in Reading*, Proceedings of the International Reading Association, *11*, 434–439.

Myers, C. A. (March 1978). Reviewing the Literature on Fernald's Technique of Remedial Reading. *The Reading Teacher, 31*, 614–619.

Nation, I. S. P. (2001). *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

National Reading Panel. (2000). *Teaching Children to Read: An Evidence-based Assessment of the Scientific research Literature on Reading and its Implications for Reading Instruction.* Washington, DC: National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

Noland, E. C., and Schuldt, W. J. (Winter 1971). Sustained Attention and Reading Retardation. *The Journal of Experimental Education. 40(2)*, 73–76.

Pearson, P. D. and Studt, A. (1975). Effects of Word Frequency and Contextual Richness on Children's Word Identification Abilities. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 67*, 89–95.

Perfetti, C. A. and Hogoboam, T. (1975). Relationship Between Single Word Decoding and Reading Comprehension Skills. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 67*, 461–469.

Roberts, R. W., and Coleman, J. C. (1958). An Investigation of the Role of Visual and Kinesthetic Factors in Reading Failure. *Journal of Educational Research, 51*, 445–451.

Samuels, S. J., (1971). *Attention and Visual Memory in Reading Acquisition*. Research Report #26, U.S. Office of Education, Bureau of Education for the Handicapped.

Samuels, S. J.; Begy, G. and Chen, C. C. (1975–76). Comparison of Word Recognition Speed and Strategies of Less Skilled and More Highly Skilled Readers. *Reading Research Quarterly, 11(1)*, 72–86.

Samuels, S. J., and Jefferey, W. E. (1966). Discriminability of Words and Letter Cues Used in Learning to Read. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 57*, 337–340.

Samuels, S. J. and Turnure, J. E. (1974). Attention and Reading Achievement in First-Grade Boys and Girls. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 66*, 29–32.

Shakweiler, D., and Liberman, I. (1972). Misreading: A Search for Causes. in J.F. Kavanaugh and I.G. Mattingly (eds.). *Language by Ear and Eye: The Relationships Between Speech and Reading.*, Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press.

Singer, H.; Samuels, S. J. and Spiroff, J. (1973–74). The Effect of Pictures and Contextual Conditions on Learning Responses to Printed Words. *Reading Research Quarterly, 9*, 555–565.

Staats, C. K.; Staats, A. W.; and Shutz, R. E. (1962). The Effects of Discrimination Pretraining on Textual Behavior. *Journal of Educational Psychology, 53*, 32–37.

Steinheiser, R., and Guthrie, J. T. (1977). Perceptual and Linguistic Processing of Letters and Words by Normal and Disabled Readers. *Journal of Reading Behavior, 9*, 217–225.

Sundbye, N. & McCoy, L. (1997) *Helping the Struggling Reader, What to Teach and How to Teach it*, San Antonio: PCI Educational Publishing.

Torgesen, J. K. (1978–79). Peformance of Reading Disabled Children on Serial Memory Tasks. *Reading Research Quarterly, 14(1)*, 57–87.

Vandever, T. R., and Neville, D. D. (1972–73). The Effectiveness of Tracing for Good and Poor Decoders. *Journal of Reading Behavior, 5(2)*, 119–125.

Vandever, T. R., and Neville, D. D. (1974). Letter Cues Versus Configuration Cues as Aids to Word Recognition in Retarded and Nonretarded Children. *American Journal of Mental Deficiency, 79*, 210–213.

Wolpert, E. M. (1979). *Individual Differences in Sensory Modality Functioning in First Grade Children in Learning to Read Common Words of Two Imagery Values*, unpublished doctoral dissertation, The University of Kansas, 1970.