

# Developing Concept of Word

## The Work of Emergent Readers

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*Ed is a 14-year-old student who is described as an emergent reader, despite years of one-on-one tutoring in a structured phonics program. Although he is able to employ phonics in reading lists of words, when reading connected text, Ed does not attempt to sound out words. In fact, he reads impulsively, skipping words, with little intent on getting meaning. Instead, he seems more interested in just finishing the task. He has difficulty segmenting words into sounds and refuses to attempt to spell words that he has not memorized.*

*Peter is a fifth grader who has had many special education services throughout his school career. He is also described as an emergent reader. He is unable to read even the simplest leveled reader; he skips words, reads impulsively, and ignores the picture cues. He is unable to follow along in reading with his finger effectively. His phonemic segmentation skills are poor. He does very little writing on his own because a paraprofessional usually transcribes what he has to say.*

Ed and Peter are students who, despite years of training in phonological

awareness and phonics, are unable to use these skills when reading. They don't finger point when they read, they disregard the print on the page, and they don't match their speech to the printed word. Both students exhibit characteristics of early readers who display difficulty with the "concept of word."

Concept of word has received little study from the field in recent years; and although it is mentioned as an early literacy skill in many literacy methods texts, it is generally given scant coverage (see boxes "Emergent Literacy Concepts," "Two Ways to Assess Concept of Word," and "What Does the Literature Say?"). It may be that, by its nature as an early skill easily attained by most students, it has not received much attention. As national and state mandates call for increased accountability and access to the general education curriculum for all students however, we must pay attention to the rudiments of early literacy skills so teachers can notice them and foster their development in students with disabilities.

### Literacy Approaches

Although research abounds on best practices for literacy instruction for students with learning disabilities and students at risk, a paucity of evidence doc-

uments best practices in literacy instruction for students with other disabilities, such as mental retardation. The practice of inclusion has opened classroom doors to many students with disabilities, but many of these students are not being "invited to join the literacy curriculum" in their classrooms" (Kliewer, 1998).

Discouraged with the seeming lack of progress to develop early literacy skills, practitioners who work with students with disabilities often move away from the more traditional general education curriculum after the primary grades (Katims, 1991). They spend more time on vocational and life-centered learning curriculums. When these practitioners do continue to work on literacy skills, the time allocated to instruction generally does not match that given to other students (Erikson, 2002). As a result, many students with disabilities often do not experience the intensive literacy instruction necessary for them to become literate (Katims, 1991).

Attention to the rudiments of literacy development is essential if teachers are to help students with disabilities progress in this area. Concept of word is a key early literacy skill, or concept, that matches the spoken and written word, and most students reach it without specialized attention or programming.

## Emergent Literacy Concepts

### Concepts of Print

- Knows that a book is for reading.
- Can identify front, back, top, bottom of book.
- Turns pages properly.
- Recognizes the difference between print and pictures.
- Knows that pictures and words are related.
- Knows where to begin reading on a page.
- Knows what a title is.
- Identifies page numbers.
- Knows that print is read from left to right.
- Knows that print is oral language written down.
- Reads environmental print and logos.

### Concepts of Word

- Knows what a word is.
- Can point to words on a page.
- Finger points readings of memorized text.
- Demonstrates one-to-one correspondence.
- Reads own name.
- Recognizes name in various formats.

### Concept of Letter

- Discriminates letters from symbols and from each other.
- Writes letter-like and letter forms.
- Begins to name letters.
- Sings and says alphabet.

Concept of word has been demonstrated as a pivotal event in learning to read. Morris (1993b) demonstrated that developing concept of word precedes and may facilitate the development of phonemic awareness, a skill that has been credited (National Reading Panel, 2000) as instrumental in the development of literacy skill. Given the enormous attention that phonological awareness has received in the literature, this important finding may give direction to instructional planning for many students with disabilities whose literacy skills are often fixed at the beginning emergent level.

Educators have used various approaches to help students like Ed and Peter develop concept of word. These activities include environmental print, picture-word matching, repeated reading of predictable and leveled texts, language experience stories, and scaffolded writing. This article describes each of these activities, as well as steps for implementing them.

### Environmental Print

Many prereading and emergent literacy activities involve the use of identifying or "reading" environmental print. Students practice "reading" various logos or signs with which they are familiar. The famous McDonald's golden arches are a familiar logo that many young children quickly identify and relate to meaningfully.

Research on this activity indicates that students readily learn environmental print because of the visual and contextual cues that are embedded and associated with the logos (Cloer, Aldridge, & Dean, 1981/1982). In fact, when one gradually withdraws or fades the embedded and contextual cues, students have more difficulty recognizing the logo (Kuby, Goodstadt-Killoran, & Aldredge, 1999). Braden (1989) developed an early literacy program based on using environmental print and product logos to teach students with Fragile X to read. In her program, students first learned logos of familiar places (Safeway, K-Mart, Subway), and then, using fading prompts, students gradually transferred their knowledge of these logos to parts of words (safe, way, sub, way). Although there may be some face validity to this type of approach, studies have indicated that the usefulness of exposure to environmental print for early reading development may be limited (Kuby et al.).

Teachers should be cautious in using environmental print to promote reading skills since learning logos does not automatically transfer to learning words. Working with environmental print and product logos that students are familiar with may be an initial way to help students focus on print; however, a more productive first step may be the use of symbols or rebuses.

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The Peabody Rebus Reading Program (Woodcock, 1968) taught students symbols or rebuses related to words through a programmed workbook format. Symbols were gradually faded to phonic elements (letters and letter combinations) to teach students words. This program used the one-to-one correspondence of symbol and word to improve students' focus on symbols and increase the ability to match speech with symbol. This program is out of print, but teachers can easily develop similar formats using picture symbols employed in many software programs. Boardmaker is a graphics database that teachers can use to create symbol reading. Writing with Symbols 2000 is another tool that allows teachers to make symbol-reading books for their students. Developing simple sentences using symbols and words and then having students point and read,

### Two Ways to Assess Concept of Word

Concept of word has been assessed in a variety of ways in the literature. Morris (1993a) practiced and read sentences with the students, reading the sentence until the student had memorized the text. Then the student was asked to read the sentence and point to each word as it was read. An example might be: I like ice cream and cake.

Roberts (1992) assessed concept of word by asking students to repeat a short sentence aloud and then write it down. Students were given credit for each space correctly left between words. For example, the student memorizes, "The boys and girls had a party yesterday." Then the student writes the sentence.

matching their pointing to their speech illustrates a typical concept of word activity.

### Picture-Word Matching

Picture-word matching activities that apply paired associate learning have been used to teach word recognition to students with disabilities (Dorry & Zeaman, 1973) and may be helpful in developing concept of word. A thorough treatment of this approach is contained in Oelwein's text, *Teaching Reading to Children with Down Syndrome* (1995).

In this approach, students begin by learning meaningful words, such as names of important people or objects in their environment. This is accomplished first through matching pictures to pictures and words and later matching pictures to words only. As students learn to match words and pictures, the words may be gradually introduced into a simple text format. For example, after the student learns the words of four favorite foods (cookies, pizza, cake, popcorn) through this matching and fading approach, the words are then used in a repetitive, predictable text format, such as "I like cookies, I like pizza, I like cake, I like popcorn." Reading predictable text, such as those created by teachers on the basis of students' interest, has been cited (Katims, 1991) as a promising approach for students with mental retardation.

### Repeated Reading of Predictable and Leveled Texts

Researchers have suggested repeated reading of predictable and leveled texts as an approach for the development of early literacy skill (Clay, 1991; Katims, 2000). Predictable text contains language that is supported by pictures so that it is relatively easy to predict what the text says. As a result, predictable text allows the student to use multiple cues (memory, picture, context and language cues, repetition of language) to "read" the text. Students are directed to point to each word as they read and in this way concept of word is developed and reinforced.

Teachers can create these early texts using students' interests or purchase commercial versions. When creating

### What Does the Literature Say About Concept of Word?

Adams (1990) referred to concept of word as the recognition that the patches of units that separate words are the same units that students are able to isolate in speech. Similarly, Bear and Barone (1998) defined concept of word as the ability to match spoken words with words in text. They suggested that concept of word is a crucial beginning reading skill. It has also been suggested that students' attention must be drawn to individual words and that the development of concept of word is necessary in understanding the form of print (Juel & Meier, 1998). Morris (1993b), who has conducted much of the research on concept of word, defined it as an awareness of "the match between the spoken word and the written word in reading text" (p. 133). He described the development of concept of word as a pivotal event in learning to read because it facilitates the development of sight vocabulary and the development of phonological and phonemic awareness. Henderson (1981, 1990) also suggested the development of concept of word facilitates the development of phonemic awareness, a skill that has been credited in the literature (National Reading Panel, 2000) as instrumental in the development of literacy skill.

In a developmental study, Morris (1993b) examined the sequence of development of concept of word and phonemic awareness and suggested that the development of concept of word precedes and may facilitate the development of phonemic awareness. Further, he suggested that beginning reading instruction need not await the development of phonemic segmentation skills, but should be preceded by it. Given the enormous attention that phonological awareness has received in the literature as a pivotal skill in the development of literacy, this important finding by Morris (1993b) may give direction to instructional planning for students with more disabilities whose literacy skills are often fixed at the beginning emergent level. Morris (1993b) suggested that early approaches to literacy development for students struggling with the development of concept of word would be "top down" approaches such as instructing students in language experience, having them share book experiences, and encouraging them to write.

these early texts, Fountas and Pinnell (1999) suggest that the print should be restricted to one line of print per page. Fonts used should be large enough for students to focus but small enough for students to see the entire word at a glance. Size 36 font is a good choice.

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Sentence structure in these early texts should be simple and repetitive, and text language should be natural. Text should be placed on the same place on each page and pictures should be direct-

ly related to the text, so that students can use the pictures to "predict" what the print says. Texts should be short and of high interest to the students.

Many early, predictable texts are available commercially and may be purchased. Catalogs generally offer leveled texts in sets of six, but many publishers will consent to individual requests for the purchase of single copies. And because many publishers offer leveled texts, levels are computed in a variety of ways. In developing concept of word, only the earliest-leveled books are appropriate; teachers may want to obtain a leveling correlation chart such as the one found at <http://www.wright-group.com> to verify the level of the book they are using. A large number of these emergent readers should be available for students with disabilities to use and enjoy.

When using leveled texts, take care that students successfully finger point

when they read. The repetitious and predictable nature of these texts makes it easy for many students to memorize, even after only a few readings, so when this occurs, make sure that students match their voice with their finger pointing. This will help them establish concept of word and sharpen their focus and attention on print.

Students who are impulsive may find it quite difficult to monitor their finger pointing and may need various physical, verbal, and visual prompts to help them master this task. Other students may not have the motor skills to be able to demonstrate their understanding of concept of word. More physical prompting and viewing windows (slotted cards) may be used to help students focus on words when reading simple texts. For students who are unable to point, teachers may point for them, exaggerating the pause between words to reinforce the idea of "reading the spaces." Paraprofessionals and parents can be taught to use these simple approaches, and all adults working with the student should be aware of the importance of matching their voice with their finger pointing to ensure that concept of word skills are being consistently reinforced.

### **Language Experience Stories**

Another approach to help students develop concept of word is language experience stories. Fernald (1943) used a type of language experience approach to help students with a variety of disabilities to learn to read. She used a holistic, tracing method to teach students to read the sentences that they had constructed. The language experience approach capitalizes on the students' experiences, and their language, social and cultural, and cognitive knowledge and abilities (Stauffer, 1970). Bos and Vaughn (2002) described a modified language experience approach designed to help students who have had limited success with other approaches to learn to read. This approach used the student's oral language skills to help the student make the connection that reading is "talking written down."

In the language experience approach, students share an activity

with the teacher and classmates. This may be a field trip, an activity as part of a unit of study, a visitor to the classroom, or even a shared book. Students discuss the activity, and easel paper is used to capture the students' thinking, their vocabulary, and the concepts they present. The teacher then writes down the ideas presented in sentence format. The teacher encourages the students to use their own language, keeping editing of the students' language to a minimum.

As the story is constructed, parts are periodically reread to help students focus on what they have already written. When the story is completed, it is read aloud to the students with the teacher pointing to each word as it is

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read. The group reads the story many times chorally. Gradually the pointing and reading responsibility is transferred to the students, and eventually the student reads the story independently. To promote concept of word, students are directed to match their reading with the text.

This story reading is repeated until the students are able to point to each word as it is read. The language experience stories may be collected and published in a book and placed in the classroom library for other students to share, or the story may be added to a collection in the student's reading and writing portfolio.

The language experience story can be extended to other activities, such as illustrating the story. Doing illustrations as an extension activity is important because it reinforces the notion that

reading is meaningful. Other extension activities include reading the story to others and sharing the story with family. Extension activities may also include picking out words to examine sound and symbol relationships or examine word meanings.

Chart paper is helpful when starting to use the language experience approach with students with disabilities and other struggling students. Use writing that is large and that accentuates the spaces between words. Begin with labeling favorite objects, writing captions for pictures, writing names of people in the environment, or writing repetitive sentences.

Teachers may need to develop much of the "storyline" for students whose expressive language is limited. In this case, care should be taken to use simple, repetitive, and predictable language. (See Figure 1.) An added benefit to using language experience stories is that students learn to read some words, but the focus at this time is "reading the spaces," and finger pointing to text. Once the story is constructed, practice reading and rereading the story with students and using the story in extension activities.

### **Scaffolded Writing**

Scaffolded writing has also been helpful in developing student awareness of word (Douvill, 2000; Soderman, Gregory, & O'Neill, 1999). In scaffolded writing, students dictate a sentence that they would like to write. The teacher draws a line to represent each of the words that are to be written. Then the student uses the drawn lines to write each word of the sentence. For example, the student may dictate the sentence, "We had pizza." The teacher draws a line for each of these words: " \_\_\_\_\_ . " After the lines are drawn, the teacher and student point to each line and say out loud each word while tapping the respective lines. This is done until the student remembers the words that each line represents. Then the student attempts to write each of the words on the lines drawn. The focus is not on correct spelling, but on having the student represent each separate word in some way.

**Figure 1. Teacher-Constructed Language Experience Story**

March 4, 2003

Good morning, Kim.

Good morning, Jack.

Good morning, Billy.

Good morning, Mary.

Researchers have shown scaffolded writing to be an effective method to improve the writing of students in kindergarten (Bodrova & Leong, 1998). Though researchers have not yet demonstrated its utility in helping students with disabilities develop concept of word, the focus on matching speech with visual lines may be a promising way to help students develop concept of word. This is certainly an avenue for further investigation.

### **One Student's Application**

Once concept of word develops and students successfully match words in print with spoken language, students' attention may be more finely focused toward the phonological aspects of words, helping them to appreciate that words are made up of sounds. Wilson, a 9-year-old student with disabilities who shows considerable anxiety when dealing with literacy tasks, is a case in point. He had much difficulty reading any type of connected text, displaying an inability to

focus on individual words. He could name about half the letters of the alphabet but made different errors each time he was asked. He showed little ability to segment words into individual sounds. Wilson sang the Alphabet Song, slurring together the "l-m-n-o-p" section. Even using very structured, multi-sensory approaches, Wilson showed great difficulty learning letter names and their corresponding sounds. He would seem to master one letter name or sound and then confuse it the next day with the other letters that he was learning. Wilson had an easier time learning words through matching words with their pictures. He had not developed concept of word or phonological awareness.

Wilson began to use a symbol-reading program for 15 minutes per day to develop left to right tracking, the notion that symbols stand for words, and concept of word. He pointed and named each symbol as he "read" them and worked for about 2 months with this

program, at which time he was successfully transferred to a more traditional sight-word reading and contextualized reading program. Within another few months, Wilson began to use basic letter sound correspondences to begin to decode unfamiliar words (Figure 2). A more structured phonics program was instituted at that time.

Beginning literacy instruction by teaching students sound and symbol relationships before developing concept of word may be misguided and misplaced instruction. Beginning literacy instruction that teaches students to "read" sight words through errorless, programmed learning materials before developing concept of word may also be misguided and misplaced instruction.

### **Moving Beyond Emergent Literacy**

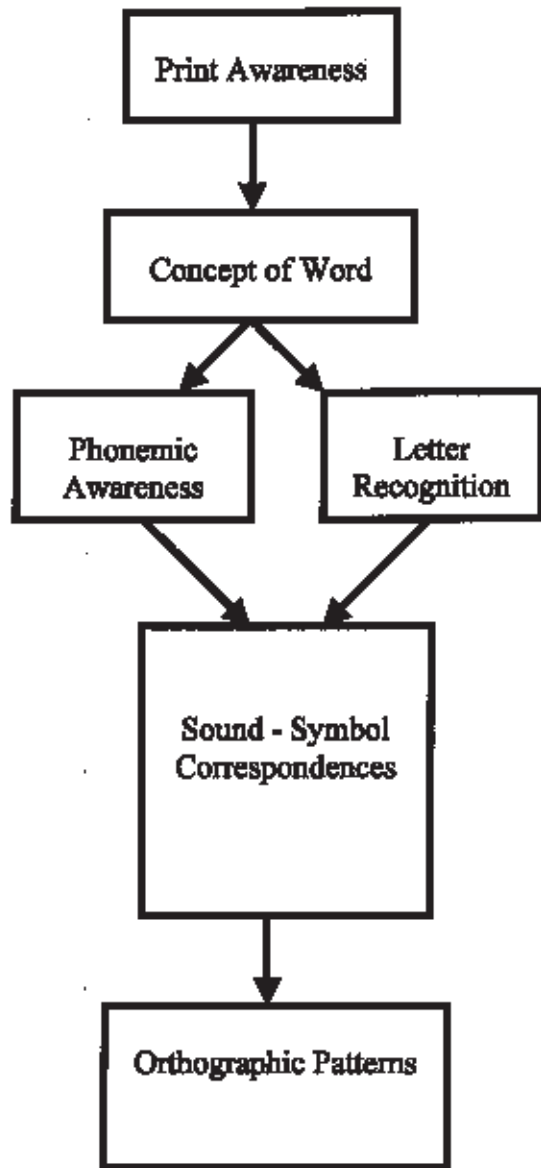
To move many students with disabilities, like Wilson, beyond emergent literacy, focusing on developing concept of word may be an essential first step. Many questions remain to be answered, such as the following:

- How much time should students with disabilities spend on literacy instruction to become literate?
- What methods are more effective in helping students develop concept of word?
- Which students respond differently to different methods?

As special educators accept the challenges of ensuring literacy access for all students, they will need to make keen observations of students' interaction with print. Attention to concept of word may help teachers develop methods appropriate for students with disabilities who seem trapped at the emergent literacy level. Focusing on this important emergent concept may help students move beyond emergent skills with the refinement of their attention toward the finer perceptual tasks of letter recognition and phonological and phonemic awareness.

Increasing evidence in the literature of descriptive studies shows that students with developmental disabilities do respond to stimulating, literacy-rich environments (Hedrick, Katims, & Carr, 1999). As teachers of students with dis-

**Figure 2. Development of Decoding Skills**



**The famous McDonald's golden arches are a familiar logo that many young children quickly identify and relate to meaningfully.**

abilities who struggle with reading, we need to notice small steps in literacy development that indicate students' growth. Focusing on concept of word is

a great first step for students and teachers alike.

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