

The Importance of Sight Word Recognition to Improve Reading Fluency

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Abstract

Reading is one of crucial skills for mastering English proficiency. It does not only involve the ability to pronounce correctly, but also to understand the text as a whole. It does not only have tremendous power when it comes to fuelling the development of all aspects of language ability, its importance to the entirety of a human life cannot really be overstated nowadays. The fact that English is full of silent letters and unexpected sounds provoke the learners to simply memorize the spelling of a word in order to recognize its written form in the future. The inconsistency between letters and phonemes, more than one way to spell the same sound, are the basic problems for the learners, especially beginners. Dealing with the matter of inconsistency, the technique and strategy to learn English is gradually upgraded. This study applies descriptive analysis method to reveal the sight word recognition strategy focusing on upgrading the competency in mastering vocabularies and reading. The findings show that by activating the recognition of sight word and associating phoneme (sounds) and grapheme (letters), learners tend to be more easily figure out the words and understand the text. By having sight words vocabularies through orthographic mapping, the process of understanding reading text becomes easier. Learners know the words more quickly since sight word recognition improves reading fluency and efficiency. In its process, as learners see the word, they automatically activate the recognition of its meaning and pronunciation at the same time.

Keywords : Word Recognition, Reading

Introduction

Reading is important, because if you can read, you can learn anything about everything and everything about anything. Thomas Anthony dePaola, an American writer,

through his precious quote, confirmed that possessing the ability to read accurately will enlighten the comprehension of any other valuable matters of life. No one could actually abandon the value of reading and having the proper skill of reading, at once. The importance of reading is also highlighted by the words of Victor Hugo, one of the greatest French writers. *To learn to read is to light a fire; every syllable that is spelled out is a spark.* To read means to study such epiphany for living the meaningful life, indeed. It is not a matter of single entity, but surely it takes several elements and efforts to embody the core concept and purpose of proficient reading.

Reading, however, does not mean that the words are merely spoken in correct pronunciation, but it also emphasizes the comprehension of the whole meaning of the text thoroughly. It involves the understanding of both literal and figurative meaning, techniques, and grasping the purpose and core meaning beyond the text. In order to do so, certain strategies are inevitably needed. In fact, a lot of people think that reading is difficult. It is not as simple as spelling the letters and pronouncing the words altogether. Moreover, the text will somehow tend to be more complicated when it is not in readers' native language. They find such tricky complexity while learning to be good readers. That is why there are a lot of readers, but only a few that can be called as good and talented readers.

As one of the crucial skills in mastering English proficiency, reading cannot be separated from other language skills. They are speaking, listening, and writing, completed by apprehending pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary as well. All those abilities are connected each other as unity. In other word, the good language learners should acquire all those language skills as a whole.

Each skill has certain difficulties and challenges to deal with. There are also strategies and techniques to learn in order to be the competent language learners. Among other skills, reading has its own complexity. To be able to read an English text, learners should understand about syllable, sound, decoding, and pronunciation as the basic primary skills. However, developing strong reading skills is one of the key goals of every early education program. It is through reading that learners expand their vocabulary and learn about the world. Reading is also the key to success in spelling and writing.

The case, nowadays, is that even the importance of acquiring reading skill was already known, but the interest to read, especially English text is still below expectation. Those who live in big cities tend to be more skilful and have more concerns to increase reading skill than those living in rural area. The data from *old.perpusnas.go.id* proved that reading interest especially in Indonesia is getting declined. The problems arisen over decades signified that even people are aware of the benefit of reading, they keep feeling hesitate and are unwilling to learn more about the technical steps and strategies.

The availability of technology facility such as gadget and media should actually simplify the access to get connected to any new information out there. There is no single thing popping out through the internet that cannot be accessed by anyone in any different areas. Since today is the era where a simple touch of fingers could predominate a lot of big changes, people must expeditiously utilize the chance to take the benefits, upgrade self-quality, and surely to learn knowledge. The same thing happens to the process of learning English language. It is even better to learn English using technology through the internet and media. People can directly interact with the native speakers or just simply study English by having an online class with the native experts.

For some people, learning English is quite tricky and bothersome. Furthermore, when it comes to reading, the first thing arouse on their mind is that it could be terribly tiresome to struggle with a lot of unfamiliar words. They might feel clueless, have no idea of how to pronounce the words, and what those words mean. Hence, there are a lot of experts develop new technique and strategies for learners to cope with these basic problems of reading, that is to get more familiarity and understand the English word easily.

The main problem in reading is mostly about understanding new vocabularies. ESL learners usually find difficulties while trying to understand the meaning. They begin translating each word to their native language first before trying to understand the text contextually as a whole. It could be simply the matter of habitude, though. If the habit keeps occurring that way, their learning progress will be surely delayed.

However, instead of an innate capacity, reading is a skill required to be learned. To read means to recognize and interpret language that has been written. The reading process involves two levels, the lower level and higher level. Lower-level processes include decoding

or recognizing words in the text and accessing lexical entries. Meanwhile higher-level processes include applying background knowledge to the text, inferring meaning that is not explicitly stated in the text, interpreting writer's intention and so on¹. To be able to master reading skill, learners cannot avoid these steps, indeed. It is necessary to learn the lower level first in order to gain the higher level. Mastering the first level involve the comprehensive skill on understanding English words and vocabularies.

Hence, in this paper, the strategies of having Sight Word Recognition will be elaborated thoroughly to overcome the difficulties in learning reading. It is especially to get accustomed to many unfamiliar English words in order to acquire easier way to understand the text and become the true talented readers, at once.

Method

The study is designed to solve the problems in mastering reading as one of English skill by using sight word recognition strategy to help the students to improve their skill in reading fluency. It applies descriptive analysis method in order to reveal the importance and benefit of sight word recognition strategy for improving reading fluency. The strategy is also revealed to enhance reading competency in order to be the true talented readers.

Finding & Discussion

A. Sight Word Recognition

A text is a group of several sentences derived from a number of words having the coherence and unity of meaning. A text can be any example of written or spoken language, from something as complex as a book or legal document to something as simple as the body of an email or the words on the back of a toy box. Traditionally, a text is understood to be a piece of written or spoken material in its primary form. A text is any stretch of language that can be understood in context. It may be as simple as 1-2 words, such as a stop sign, or as complex as a novel. Any sequence of sentences that belong together can be considered a text².

To understand a text means to know the meaning of its words. It becomes a serious problem when it comes to an English text. Readers need to master dozens of English

¹ Syukri, Developing reading Comprehension Skills and Strategies. (Bandung: 2015)

² Ching, Linguistic Perspectives on Literature. (Routledge, 2015)

vocabularies. They have to memorize the words that usually have the different sound to pronounce from the written version. It is such a uniqueness of learning native language, though. The letter combination on its written version has quite different sound when it is being pronounced. For example, the letter *i* used to be spelled as /i/. But when the letter is found in the word *river*, a reader cannot pronounce it as /rɪvər/. They have to pronounce it as /'rivər/. Another example is the word *mature*. It is not pronounced as /mətər/, but it has to be /mə'CHoor/. Those kinds of differences happen to most all the English words. There are many learners unavoidably feel a lot of pressures and confuse about the correct spelling and pronunciation.

In addition, the basic problems appear more critically for the beginners trying to figure out unfamiliar words in certain texts. They have to deal with the translation and meaning, also the sound and correct pronunciation at the same time. The process triggers such a reluctance to continue learning reading. Another reason why English is not the easiest language for beginner readers is because of the lacking correspondence in sounds to letters. In other words, there is more than one way to spell the same sound. The learners, especially the beginners, have to memorize and notice dozens English vocabularies, completed with the pronunciation, the written form, and the meaning as well. These complications provoke the depletion of their determination to seriously learn to read.

The living assumption labelled to English language saying that English is very difficult to learn, in a certain sense, contribute more or less negative stigma about the language itself. That is why people easily jump to conclusion that any steps for learning English will be so tricky and complicated. However, English is still seen as priority as the most important foreign language to be taught³. As foreign language, English is used neither as a mean of communication in official domains nor social life. Thus, learning English is important to communicate with others in any sectors of life nowadays.

As the first level of learning strategy, recognizing words or popular with the term Sight Word Recognition, becomes the easy solution to get familiar with English words. It is a simple way to learn about the words without feeling pressures, especially for the beginners.

³ Lauder, *The status and function of English in Indonesia: a review of key factors*. Makara Human behaviour studies in Asia. Vol. 12. 2008

Sight words are words that students are expected to recognize instantly. Applying the right technique, students can become so familiar with these words that they no longer need to pause and try to decode them. Some sight words are regularly spelled words, and some are spelled irregularly.

If learners are not fluent in word recognition, they think about the sounds of the individual letters and letter combinations rather than using that energy to make sense of the text being read. In contrast, because a fluent reader dedicates little capacity to word recognition, most of the capacity is available for comprehension.

In English language, there is what so called exceptionally irregular orthography. Whereas Indonesian has remarkably transparent language. In this case, transparency means that the correspondences between the sound and writing symbols in Indonesian orthography are nearly one-to-one mappings⁴. The appearing differences might come as obstacle for ESL learner to read English text. The other obstacle might be caused by the limited and occasional use of English, so that learner might find difficulty to achieve comprehension in reading English text.

However, reading English text is different from the Indonesian one. The difference lies in orthography. Orthography deals with the spelling system. In sight word recognition strategy, learners are taught the skill called orthographic mapping. It is also called word mapping or phoneme-grapheme mapping. Orthographic mapping is the process where children learn to recognize each letter of the alphabet and how each letter represents one sound. It's how words become sight words. It is a process used to store printed words in long term memory⁵.

Orthography mapping is a bit different from decoding. Even though both decoding and orthography are defined as critical terms in basic English learning, but there are still some differences in applying the technique. Decoding breaks down words into sequences of sounds in order to determine the appropriate pronunciation. Meanwhile, orthographic mapping recognizes the visual outline of a word using that word without having to sound it out.

⁴ Widjaja 7 Winskel, *Applied Psycholinguistics*. (Sydney: 2017)

⁵ Lyon, *Sight Words: An evidence-based literacy strategy*. (New York: 2022)

Orthographic mapping is essential for learning sight word, indeed. When learners see a word, for instance, they break it apart by the sounds heard in the word, letter, and letter patterns that correspond to those sound. This process fixes the word into long-term memory. The learners eventually recognize the word immediately when seeing it. While still seeing all the letters, they simply know the word that they do not have to sound it out.

Through recognizing words by the sight, learners are accustomed to notice the words and the sound at the same time. The teacher or instructor speak the word out, then students find the correct written form among several printed papers. It could be not only the written words, but also added by the symbol or picture, since orthography refers to a system for representing sounds or spoken language with letters or other symbols. As learners read the text, they build sight word vocabulary as well. By simultaneously doing this strategy, students are able to memorize English vocabularies both graphically and phonemically as well as understanding the text literally.

In learning to recognize sight word, learners get to acknowledge high-frequency words. There also other terms include star words, core words, and popcorn words. It is called so because these words ‘pop up’ so frequently in reading and writing. For example, the words *the*, *it*, and *and* appear so often, so readers no longer need to try to sound out these words. They recognize them by sight. It is especially important for these frequently used words to become sight words.

Some of high frequency words are below:

High frequency word	Sentences
The	Pay the bill and ask for a receipt
And	Pay the bill and ask for a receipt
A	I bring a book to the library
To	She asks me to reply the message
Said	They said that everything is okay
In	Protein is found in meat, fish, and cheese
He	He wants to cut her hair in a barber shop
I	I think about going swimming this weekend

Of	The height of Eiffel Tower is 300m
It	The apple is ripe, so pick it

(*Spellzone, 2022*)

The high frequency words appear more frequently than other words. There is also what so called as more complex words that are of high interest to the learners, such as *Spiderman, Captain, Horse*, and so on. However, learners can read with better fluency when they recognize these words right away. Learning sight words explicitly can help cement the words into students' memories.

Research shows that most readers need between one and four exposures to a word to commit it to long-term memory. Struggling readers need even more exposure to new words because orthographic mapping can be hard. Repeated practices with sight words give them the exposure they need to build their sight word vocabulary.

There are the three-part strategies to learn sight word recognition. It starts with sound-letter mapping, then moves to a flashcard activity, and ends with other ways to keep reinforcing the sight words with repeated exposure.

1. Sound-letter mapping

Learning the sounds of letters is an important part of learning to read. Having ability to read, however, gives more access to gain meaning and information from the text exposed. Whereas possessing good comprehension of written source enables to achieve huge number of knowledges. Thus, having the good ability to read is a must-have skill that cannot be overstated. The very first thing to do is to deal with the sound. For doing so, the learners have to develop the mapping.

Learners first start by sounding out each individual sound within a word. Over time, they begin to recognize patterns in what they are reading because certain sounds appear over again in words. Then, they will eventually be capable to read the patterns quickly without sounding them out every time. For example, learners already read the word *rat* very often that they now come across *hat* and *sat*. They simply can read the *-at* part quickly because it has been orthographically mapped. Every time they are introduced to new words, they use their sight word vocabulary to decode the new word because they have already created orthographic maps for these words.

In addition, to optimize the mapping, learners actually also need to be proficient in phoneme awareness and have automatic letter-sound associations. However, when it comes to phonology, no one can avoid the term *phoneme*. Having phonological awareness means that the ability to recognize the sound already meets the sensitivity. Phoneme awareness is a foundational skill to start learning reading easier.

According to Kilpatrick (2020), weak readers do not naturally acquire orthographic mapping because they lack advanced phonemic awareness skills⁶. It is important to provide intervention in phoneme addition, deletion, and substitution. He also designs a simple class activity to enhance phonemic awareness. In this following instruction, T is the teacher and Ss is the student.

1. T say the word *nap*. Ss repeat it.
2. T asks Ss to say it again without the sound /n/, not the letter. Ss should say *-ap*.
3. T asks Ss to say *nap* again, but this time instead of /n/ say /l/. Ss should say *lap*.
4. Ss is asked to say *lap*, but add a /s/ to the beginning. Ss should say *slap*.

In sound-letter mapping, there is also a technique called Phoneme-Grapheme Mapping. It is a visual way to represent the relationship between phonemes (sounds) and their graphemes (letters). It is about connecting the sound with the letters that represent the sound. The following is the example of activity to do the mapping.

1. T says the word. Ss repeat the word.
2. T's finger tap the word to sound it out and count the phonemes.
3. T uses a manipulative to represent each sound. T can draw something on the board, like a line or dot to do this. It helps to use a different color for each sound.
4. T spells each sound. Then T asks students what letters make the sound. T writes the letters above the manipulative used to represent the sound. Ss write the letters that represent each sound in the boxes.

⁶ Kilpatrick, *Equipped for Reading Success*. (Casey & Kirsch Publishers: 2020)

5. T discusses any irregular spelling patterns, talk about the origin of the word, or the rule or pattern to help Ss remember it. T draws a heart above the tricky letters, then tells Ss that they need to remember this part by heart.
6. T asks questions relating to the sequence of the letters: What's the first sound? Which letter says /b/? What sound does the letter t say? What letter comes after the /b/ sound?
7. Ss slide their finger across the line under the boxes while saying each sounds to blend the word.
8. Ss read the word aloud.
9. Ss write the word on the lines saying each letter as they write it.

Those all activities above aim at helping learners to master the mapping in order to recognize the sight words. The more words a student knows, the easier it will be to recognize them in reading. As English is full of silent letters and unexpected sounds, the learners must simply memorize the spelling of a word in order to recognize its written form in the future. By having sight words vocabularies, the process will come right away and in an easy way, indeed.

2. Flashcard activity

The activity purposively will increase the number of sight words that can be recognized instantly as soon as learners notice the sound. It also helps to connect the sounds and letters in words together. For example, the teacher gives flashcards to students with one word on each card. Then he/she divides the activity into rounds.

In round one, the teacher shows and reads the words one at a time to students. Then he waits three seconds to give students time to look at each word's letters and patterns. Then he asks them to repeat the word. In round two, the cards are shuffled and showed one at a time. After that, the teacher waits three seconds and then asks students to read the word. If students read the word incorrectly or aren't able to read it, point out a memorable feature. For example, "Notice the *-ed* at the end of *used*." The teacher waits three seconds and asks students to try the word again. The activity will keep going through the stack of cards until students correctly identify each word at least twice.

This flashcard activity has several benefits, though. It suits well to learners at any levels. The activity offers such enjoyable learning that makes students no longer feel so much burden and pressure in learning sight word recognition.

3. Reinforcement

The last strategy to drill sight word recognition skill is reinforcement. The very last step is to continue to reinforce the sight words with repeated exposure, no matter activities chosen. It can be done by reading text on any genres, depend on learners' favourite choice, that contain sight words. In this part, learners also can use word walls or word banks to help keep track of the words they have learned. When learners can consistently recognize the words by sight, it just then can be added to regular games and activities.

Conclusion & Suggestion

Instead of an innate capacity, reading is a skill required to be learned. To read means to recognize and interpret language that has been written. It is not only about pronounce the words out loud, but also to understand the text as a whole. The basic problems appear more critically for the beginners trying to figure out unfamiliar words in certain texts. They have to deal with the translation and meaning, also the sound and correct pronunciation at the same time. The process triggers such a reluctance to continue learning reading.

Another reason why English is not the easiest language for beginner readers is because of the lacking correspondence in sounds to letters. In other words, there is more than one way to spell the same sound. The learners, especially the beginners, have to memorize and notice dozens English vocabularies, completed with the pronunciation, the written form, and the meaning as well. These complications provoke the depletion of their determination to seriously learn to read.

Those problems related to the process of mastering reading skill. As one of English competencies, reading deals with a lot of unfamiliar vocabularies that need to memorise. To overcome those problems, there is a strategy focussing on the technique to easily understand the words in order to comprehend the text. It is Sight Word Recognition.

Sight words are common words that are expected to be recognized instantly by the learners. By recognizing sight words, learners do not have to pause to blend its letter-sound together and think about spelling rules. They know and understand the word simply by sight. Recognizing sight word means associating phonemes (sounds) with graphemes (letters). It involves the crucial strategy, that is usually called as orthographic mapping. It is not merely an activity, but more about a mental process happening as students learn to read.

By activating the skill of sight word recognition, learners will improve reading fluency and efficiency. In its process, as learners see the word, they automatically activate the recognition of its meaning and pronunciation. In sight word recognition, there are several high frequency words in which students see the words repeatedly. Having recognition to these words will unavoidably increase the capability to read and understand the text more quickly and easily. In addition, there are also three-part strategy that will help learners to

more easily engaged to the process of recognizing sight word. They are sound-letter mapping, flashcard activity, and reinforcement.

In short, sight word recognition helps to know a word by sight rather than need to break the word apart. When readers immediately know written words and what they mean, they understand more. Readers who have to work to figure out many words in a text can lose track of the overall meaning. In this process, as soon as the word is seen, the meaning and pronunciation of the word are automatically activated.

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