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Concept of Word in Text: An Integral Literacy Skill

Predictor of Reading Achievement

We've long known that a student's ability to identify letters is a reliable predictor of their later reading success (Adams, 1990; Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998). But did you know that a student's Concept of Word (COW) in text serves as another reliable indicator of their success as a reader? Current literacy research shows that Concept of Word development serves as a valid and reliable kindergarten predictor of first grade reading achievement (Morris, Bloodgood, & Perney, 2003; Warley, Landrum, & Invernizzi, 2005). This evidence suggests that more attention should be paid to both identifying students' stage of Concept of Word development and incorporating Concept of Word instruction into daily practice.

What is Concept of Word in Text?

In the past, definitions of Concept of Word in text have focused almost entirely on a student's understanding of the speech-to-print match. In fact, it's much more. This critical literacy skill represents more than a student's ability to point to words on a page. Achieving a solid Concept of Word in text is actually the culmination of a student's automatic knowledge of letter sounds, their ability to isolate beginning consonant sounds, and their ability to remember words in isolation that were viewed previously in text (Flanigan, 2007; Morris, 1993). Therefore, incorporating Concept of Word instruction into daily literacy practice will not only strengthen students' speech-to-print match, it will also develop students' alphabet knowledge, phonemic awareness, and knowledge of words in print. However, Concept of Word in text is not an all or nothing literacy skill - there is a developmental continuum.

PALS Concept of Word Task

The Concept of Word continuum includes developing, rudimentary, and firm levels that can be determined by examining the Pointing, Word Identification (ID) in Context, and COW Word List scores on the Concept of Word task on the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS). The Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) consists of two screening instruments, PALS-K and PALS 1-3, that measure students' knowledge of important literacy fundamentals, including phonological awareness, alphabet recognition, letter sounds, spelling, concept of word, and word recognition in isolation (Invernizzi, Meier, & Juel, 2005). The purpose of PALS is to identify students who may be at risk for later developing reading difficulties. PALS also serves as a diagnostic tool to provide teachers with specific information about what students know and need to know about each component of literacy, including Concept of Word. The Concept of Word task on PALS-K and PALS 1-3 consists of the following subtasks:

Pointing
- The student is first taught to orally recite a nursery rhyme using a picture sheet.
- When the student can recite the nursery rhyme verbatim, the nursery rhyme text is introduced and the teacher models how to finger-point read the text, using echo and choral reading.
- Last, the student finger-point reads the text independently and their response is scored in an all-or-none manner, one point per line.

Word ID.

- The student is asked to identify two target words in context per line of text, with one point awarded for each word correctly identified.
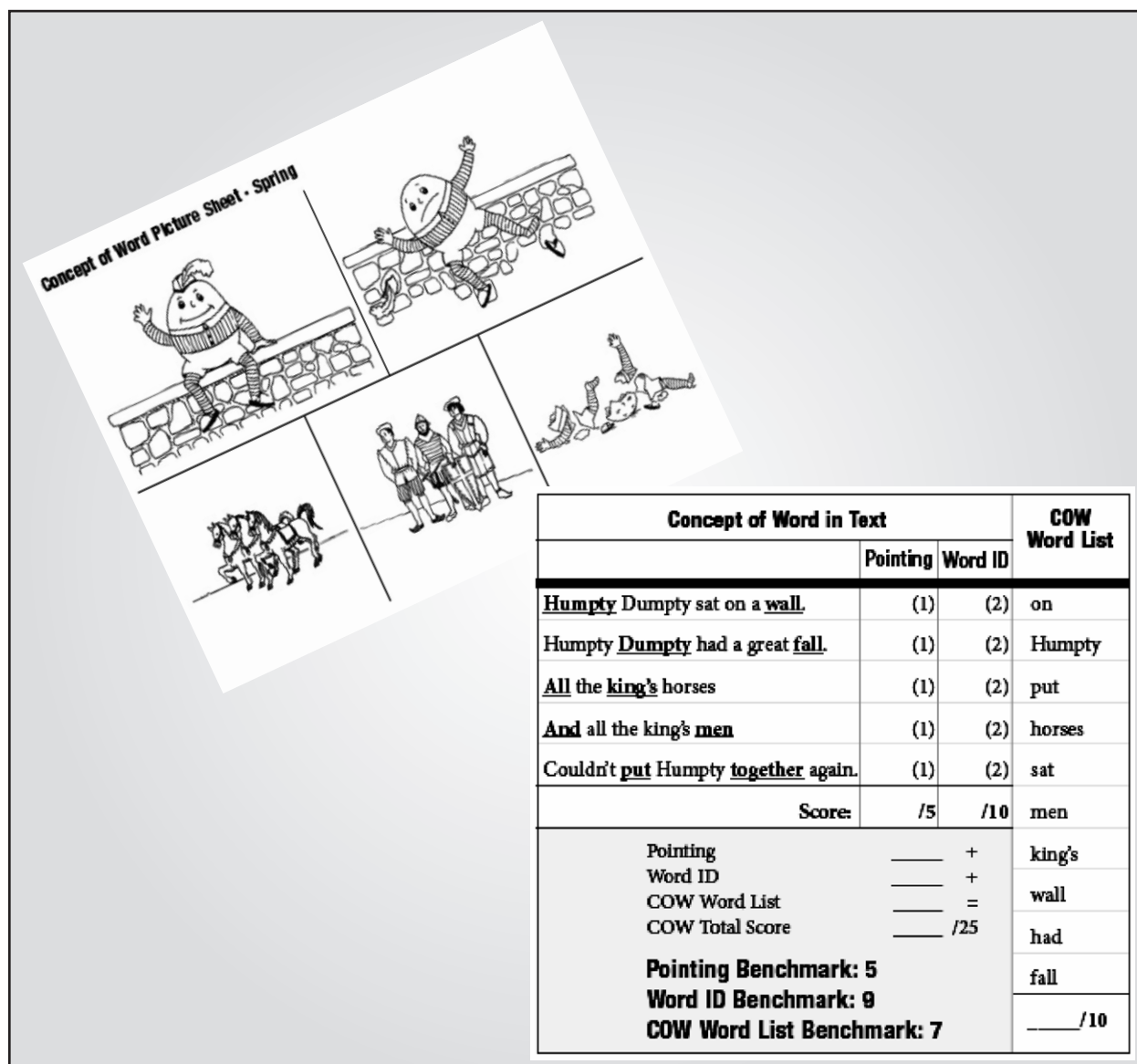
COW Word List

- The student is asked to identify words from the nursery rhyme on a word list. One point is awarded for each word correctly identified.

Figure 1 shows the picture sheet used to teach the rhyme Humpty Dumpty, as well as the Student Summary Sheet used to score the COW task.

The Concept of Word in Text Continuum

Developing. (PALS COW scores: Pointing 0-5, Word ID in Context 0-5, COW Word List 0-3) Students on the lowest end of the continuum, who possess little to no Concept of Word in text, are able to learn to say the words to the nursery rhyme but can not accurately point to the words they are saying. These students do not yet understand the one-to-one correspondence between the spoken words of the nursery rhyme and the words in the text because they do not have the alphabet and letter sound knowledge to synchronize their recitation of the rhyme

Concept of Word in Text			COW Word List
	Pointing	Word ID	
Humpty Dumpty sat on a **wall**.	(1)	(2)	on
Humpty **Dumpty** had a great **fall**.	(1)	(2)	Humpty
All the **king's** horses	(1)	(2)	put
And all the king's **men**	(1)	(2)	horses
Couldn't **put** Humpty **together** again.	(1)	(2)	sat
Score:	/5	/10	men

Pointing	____	+	king's
Word ID	____	+	wall
COW Word List	____	=	
COW Total Score	____	/25	had
			fall
Pointing Benchmark: 5			
Word ID Benchmark: 9			____/10
COW Word List Benchmark: 7			

with their pointing. In addition, these students may lack left-to-right directionality. Students with a developing understanding of Concept of Word in text lack automatic letter recognition, letter sound knowledge, and how these coordinate with the beginning sounds of words in text. In short, these students are missing the speech-to-print match.

Rudimentary. (PALS COW scores: Pointing 5, Word ID 9-10, COW Word List 3-7) Moving along the continuum, students with a rudimentary Concept of Word in text can accurately point to or track words as they say the nursery rhyme. These students may temporarily get off track on a two-syllable word, but are frequently able to self-correct. Students with a rudimentary Concept of Word in text may also be able to correctly identify some words in the context of the text, but they are not yet able to identify those same words in isolation. For example, a student with only a rudimentary Concept of Word in text might be able to read the line "Humpty Dumpty had a great fall" using his/her memory for the rhyme and only partial letter-sound correspondences, as if it were written "H_____ D_____ h_d a g___t f_ll." This is because students with a rudimentary Concept of Word in text rely on only partial letter-sound cues and voice pointing (rereading the entire line) to figure out words. Without these important context cues, the partial letter cues alone are not enough to identify the words in isolation. For example, a student with only a rudimentary Concept of Word in text may incorrectly identify the word "fall" as "fill" when presented in isolation. In order to gain a firm Concept of Word in text, these students must also be able to fully map all of the sounds in words to their corresponding letters.

Firm. (PALS COW scores: Pointing 5, Word ID 10, COW Word List 7-10) A student has developed a firm Concept of Word in text when they are able to:

- accurately and consistently match speech to print when finger-point reading a memorized text
- identify words in the text when they are questioned randomly by the teacher
- identify the same words previously seen in context, in isolation on a word list

The Defining Difference

What's the biggest difference between students with a developing or rudimentary Concept of Word in text and those with a firm understanding of Concept of Word in text? Students with a firm Concept of Word in text can remember the words they pointed to in context when presented in isolation on a word list. Their ability to recognize these words in isolation is a result of their:

- automatic knowledge of letter sounds and their ability to fully map the sounds at the beginning, middle, and end of words to their corresponding letters
- ability to remember these words as having been included in the rhyme (Flanigan, 2007; Morris, 1993)

However, recognition of these words is only short-term, especially if this task is one of the first times a student has encountered these words. For these words to "stick" in their memory, students will need numerous experiences with these words in context through repeated interactions with text. It is critical that these interactions be with the words in connected text, not flashed in isolation.

Using PALS Scores to Plan Concept of Word Instruction

PALS assessments are designed to help teachers make instructional planning decisions. The following steps will get you started:

Step 1: Enter student PALS scores online (http://pals.virginia.edu) and print the Student Summary report.

Step 2: Look specifically at the student's Pointing, Word ID, and COW Word List scores to determine the Concept of Word stage.

Step 3: Use the Concept of Word lesson framework below and the student's COW stage to individualize instruction. For example, a lesson for students with a developing Concept of Word in text should focus on modeling finger-point reading and locating words in the context of the nursery rhyme rather than concentrating on identifying words in isolation.

Concept of Word in Text Lesson Framework

The PALS Concept of Word task provides the format of an effective COW lesson that can be used on a daily basis using a variety of nursery rhymes, songs, and other familiar texts. When choosing a rhyme for instructional purposes, make sure that it is not one used on PALS assessments.

Teach the rhyme. Concept of Word in text focuses on developing the voice-to-print match, not actual oral reading ability. Therefore, it is critical that students know the rhyme "by heart" so that the lesson targets Concept of Word in text, rather than decoding.

1. Use a picture representation of the nursery rhyme to model how to recite the nursery rhyme by pointing to each picture several times while reciting the rhyme.
2. Ask the students to:
   - Choral read the rhyme with you
   - Echo read the rhyme picture by picture
   - Recite the rhyme independently while pointing to the picture prompts
3. Repeat as many times as necessary until the student knows the rhyme "by heart." Please note that text is not used at this point and the student is not finger-point reading.

Model finger-point reading. Once students know the nursery rhyme verbatim, use the nursery rhyme text to model how to point to the words while reciting the rhyme.

1. Read the rhyme to students while pointing to each word.
2. Choral read the rhyme. Prompt the students: "Now let's read it together. Eyes on the page. Read it with me as I point to each word."
3. Echo read the rhyme, line by line. "Now we will take turns reading each line of the rhyme. First I'll read a line and touch each word. Then you will read the same line and touch each word. Ready?"
4. Invite one student to recite the rhyme while pointing to the words of the nursery rhyme. "This time I want you to do what I did. Point to each word as you say the rhyme. Be sure to touch each word as you say it."

Word identification in context. After repeated readings of the nursery rhyme text, point to several words from the text and ask "What word is this?" Model how to voice point or read through the entire line of the rhyme to figure out the target word. Next, model how to use knowledge of beginning sounds and corresponding letters to identify the target word.

Word identification in isolation. Select several words from the nursery rhyme and write them on index cards. Ask students to match each word card to its counterpart in the text of the nursery rhyme. Once the match is made, ask, "How did you know that was the same word?" Continue to ask until the student can tell you that they used the first letter and letter sound as clues to identify the word. On subsequent encounters with that word card, ask students to identify the word using the beginning letter as a cue. If they are still not able to identify the word in isolation, scaffold this activity by having the student match the word card to the word in the nursery rhyme once again. Add words the student knows immediately (without having to voice point) to the student's personal Word Bank for daily practice and word sorting by beginning sounds.

Figure 2: Correlation Between Developing Literacy Skills

Concept of Word in Text		Writing/ Spelling	Spelling Stage/ Reading Stage	PALS COW Word List Word Recognition	Decoding Words in Context
Firm COW	Accurate tracking	Correct short vowels in spelling	Middle Letter Name Speller	Knows most words (7-10)	Immediate recognition
		Vowel by letter name	Early Letter Name Speller/ Beginning Reader		
Rudimentary COW	Points to words, self corrects when gets off track	Initial and final consonants		Knows many words (3-7)	Uses beginning sounds and some voice pointing
Developing COW	Points to words says syllables	Initial consonant	Emergent Speller/ Emergent Reader	Few words known (0-3)	Voice pointing (rereads the entire line to figure out one word)
	Points to words says stressed unit (syllable or word)	Random letters – Symbol Salad 4RBC			
	Left to right directionality but no word awareness	Letter-like symbols		No words known	No words known
		Waves			

Adapted from Figure 4-10 of *Words Their Way: Word Study for Phonics, Vocabulary, and Spelling Instruction* (2008), from Gill (1992)

How is Concept of Word in Text Related to Other Literacy Skills?

Concept of Word in text develops simultaneously with other literacy skills and represents a watershed event in the development of a reader (Henderson, 1980; Invernizzi, Meier, & Juel, 2005). In fact, Concept of Word develops in relation to writing/spelling, word recognition in isolation, and word recognition in context. For instance, a beginning reader who self corrects when s/he gets off track while finger-point reading a nursery rhyme usually spells using initial and final consonants, knows

most of the words in isolation from the nursery rhyme, and is sounding out to decode words. The chart below illustrates the relationships between these developing literacy skills.

Concept of Word in Text – A Critical Component of Daily Literacy Instruction

Concept of Word in text is a reliable predictor of literacy achievement (Morris, Bloodgood, & Perney, 2003; Warley, Landrum, & Invernizzi, 2005). This often overlooked literacy skill is integral to the development of emerging and beginning readers and relies on students' knowledge of the alphabet, letter sounds, beginning sounds, and words in print. Knowing whether students have a developing, rudimentary, or firm Concept of Word in text will help define instructional plans and better meet students' needs. Use PALS scores and the Concept of Word in text lesson framework to provide daily Concept of Word instruction for those students who have not yet mastered this critical component of literacy.

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