

Questions and Answers



I was interested in your description of how important sight vocabulary is. Does that mean that we should be teaching high frequency words or essential spelling lists separately?

Good question – thanks! I'm assuming that you're meaning separately to your students being on the StepsWeb Course, so I'll answer on that basis. However, my answer would be relevant to any well-structured literacy approach which includes high frequency words.

In the StepsWeb Course, high frequency words are automatically included throughout the early Levels. They're taught as sight words (rather than spelling words) in the early stages, so that students aren't expected to independently encode or decode words which are irregular or beyond their current phonic knowledge.

However, bear in mind that the intention is that all phonic patterns/words which students were initially taught to decode/encode become sight words which can be instantly visually recognised. This is why repetition is so important. Students need to initially understand their phonic structure and learn to use it for decoding or encoding. However, they then need to see and use that word as many times as possible so that it becomes genuinely orthographically mapped to the Visual Word Form Area. Then they will be able to instantly recognise them without decoding.

I have two students in Year 8, who struggle with spelling. Their reading skills (including comprehension and fluency) are at an age-appropriate level and they enjoy reading. However their Visual Recognition Test results are very low – 350ms and 500ms. I'm not sure how their reading skills have developed so well with such poor visual recognition.

This is a really interesting one. Regarding your students, there are several possibilities (some of which are actually more common with slightly older students!). Sometimes, older students get a bit blasé about tests and do not particularly exert themselves – or get distracted. For more information, it would be useful to know the following:

- How long have they been on StepsWeb?
- Have they done the Visual Recognition Test before? If so, what were their scores?
- What are their scores for Word Flash in their student profiles?
- Are they very proficient decoders? (Not that likely given their spelling skills, perhaps!).

Then, I'd suggest re-testing them and actually watching them do the test. You could always be a bit cynical here and suggest that they will get some reward if they beat their previous scores! Amazing what that does, sometimes! To be honest, I've never come across a situation where older students didn't score at age-appropriate levels under scrutiny (or with a bit of an incentive). The reality is that, if they are genuinely fluent readers, it is unlikely that they are not able to recognise words at 150ms or faster.

Incidentally, it's worth pointing out that some teachers set the Visual Recognition Test as a routine 'end-of-year' test regardless of previous scores. This can lead to students switching off and not really trying. And, if they have ever scored at 50-100ms, there is actually no point in resetting the test. It's an 'either they can or they can't' situation. Your visual recognition speed is never going to get slower (barring very unlikely circumstances such as injury or illness, of course).

I would be interested to know how this applies to deaf learners who use Auslan (Australian Sign Language), and are learning to read written English without using voice, which makes phonemic awareness and use more complicated.

Another fascinating question! Research in this field shows that people with complete deafness learn to read using a strategy known as 'chaining'. This refers to the process of associating images and signs with words, rather than associating sounds with words.

Obviously, learning to read is much more challenging for completely deaf students and the fundamental process is significantly different. However, anecdotally, we have had a number of partially deaf students use StepsWeb and two completely deaf students that we know of. All have been able to make progress, although we would envisage that the visual recognition and visual memory aspects are far more important to those students. In terms of Uta Frith's Three Stages Model, perhaps this means that deaf students have to jump from the Logographic Stage directly to the Orthographic Stage, without the benefit of understanding how sounds map onto letter patterns.

When would you reliably screen for dyslexia then if the age and stage suggest that orthographic mapping isn't concrete until 8?

There are several points to make here. Firstly, I would point out that it is not only dyslexic students who have more difficulty developing orthographic mapping. However, research does suggest that this is one of the main groups with that challenge.

Even before the age of 8, the Visual Recognition Test enables teachers to identify students who are below the Average Range for visual recognition speed. In fact, in the prototype trial in one of our local schools, the test reliably identified struggling 5-year-olds at the very beginnings of learning to read. It even differentiated between students who were struggling and those who were having the most difficulty.

Most assessors would agree that a reliable formal diagnosis of dyslexia can't be made before the age of about 7 years of age, because many of these areas are developmental. However, having assessed many much younger students, I believe that it's identifying needs which is important – not attaching a label. To be honest, I believe that we can best meet all needs by teaching every student from the start as if they are dyslexic. Those with no difficulties will progress at their own speed anyway (and probably be boosted) and those with difficulties get the right approach from the beginning – regardless of whether they turn out to be dyslexic later.

So, to sum up, as teachers we need to screen as early as possible (try using our screening test materials!), identify needs from the beginning – and use a method which covers all the bases, for every student! And enabling each student to progress at their own level and speed is one of the main ways we can ensure that struggling students don't fall behind in the early stages. Don't wait and try to 'Fix them when they're broke!' Stop them falling through the gaps in the first place. Actually much more achievable – and without the massive negative effects of 'failing'.

Have any more questions?

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