

Personalized Key Words Strategy
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One way we have been successful at the CLDS teaching students with significant communication impairments to decode has been through the use of a key word learning strategy. The basic strategy is to help students learn to use a set of words they know to read and spell unfamiliar words. This strategy is derived from the first Benchmark School approach, but a critical difference is that we use a personalized set of keywords rather than a predetermined set. We also determine which keywords to start teaching based on the familiarity and interest in the key words that have been selected for the student.

In determining the keywords, start with the 37 most common word endings in written English. These 37 word endings have appeared in multiple places in the literature, but they are most widely known as the Wiley & Durrell (1970) list of phonograms. Given appropriate instruction, students can use 37 keywords derived from these phonograms to read and spell more than 500 primary grade words.

Begin by quickly scanning the list of 37 phonograms. Write in any words that immediately come to mind that would be highly meaningful and familiar to the student. As instruction progresses, you'll add more words. By the time you're teaching the last few key words, you'll find that it is less important that they are highly meaningful because the student will already be reading and spelling hundreds of words.

Teaching the Keywords

Once you have determined a handful of keywords that are both meaningful and familiar (at least orally) to the student, you'll begin teaching two or three of those words at a time. We use several strategies for teaching these words including: personal word walls, teacher-made texts, sentence making, and structured writing activities.

Word Walls. When using this approach in an inclusive setting, teachers can make the choice to use the personal words for the target student with complex communication needs as the words for the entire class, or a personal word wall can be constructed for the target child. Ideally, teachers choose the first and children with complex communication needs never fall behind their peers in learning to use words they know to read and write words that are less familiar.

Keywords are added to the word wall at a rate of 2-3 per week. In a typical primary grades class, an additional 2-3 high frequency words that can't be decoded but must be learned to promote reading and writing success (e.g., was, because, their, there, they're) are added each week for a total of five. In individual or self-contained settings teachers have found it useful to restrict the number added each week to 2-3 total, but they always include at least 2 keywords to support comparing and contrasting for other instructional activities. In these settings, teachers have also found that they sometimes

have to take occasional two-week breaks when they don't add new words but provide extra instruction with the words that have been added during the previous 6-8 weeks.

Whatever strategy is selected, remember that word wall is not intended to promote mastery of words when they are added to the wall. Instead, students are taught to actively use the wall to support their learning of the words over time. In other words, teachers should not determine the pace of adding new words based on how many a student could master in a week.

Teacher-made texts. One of the many benefits of starting with personally meaningful and familiar keywords is the relative ease in composing short texts that incorporate those words. These texts can be short enough to fit on a single sentence strip or they can be long enough to be published in paper or electronic form. The important thing is that students have MANY different texts in which they encounter these keywords.

Sentence Making. Since most beginning readers with complex communication needs can't dictate a language experience text for their teacher to write, teachers can generate simple sentences that students then read, reread, and manipulate in the way language experience texts are often read and manipulated. Obviously the student is not reading these short sentences aloud, but they are asked to read them "in your head" while the adult reads them several different times. After each reading, the adult talks to the child about the sentence emphasizing the keyword. Eventually the sentence is cut apart and the student rebuilds it by pointing to the words in the order they appeared in the original sentence. The student should have the opportunity to (re)build the entire sentence before feedback and correction is given. After the student makes a complete attempt, the adult should read the sentence back orally and ask the student whether or not it sounds correct. If the student recognizes errors, ask the child to identify what part needs to be fixed. Instead of starting from scratch, try to identify the error and correct it.

Structured Writing. Writing a word is a sure way to build the skills to read the word. In structured writing activities, teachers engineer legitimate reasons for the student to write the keywords they are learning. These activities can include fill-in-the-blank type activities, sentence completions, and generating the texts that students will eventually read.

Teaching Students to Use the Keywords

Teaching students the keywords themselves is only the one part of the instruction. While students are learning to read and write the keywords, they should also be engaged in word sorts and compare-contrast lessons while their teachers refer them regularly to the keywords on the word wall by saying, things like:

"There's a keyword on the word wall that will help you."

"Is there a keyword you could use to help you read that word?"

"Which keyword are you using to help you spell that word?"

"Look, here's a new word that looks like one of your keywords! Can you show me which keyword?"

“Let me write two of your keywords. Which one will help you with that word you’re trying to read?”

“Listen to the sound at the end of that word [say word]. Which of your keywords has that same sound.”

Word Sorts. Once you have two or more keywords on the word wall, teachers can work with students to sort other words that share the same spelling pattern as each keyword. Beginning with two or three keywords as column headers, the teacher then orally or visually introduces less familiar words, and the child points to indicate in which column the word belongs. Whether the student’s response is correct or incorrect, the teacher should write the new word under the keyword and guide the student in comparing and contrasting the spelling pattern with the keyword. If the new word belongs in a different column, the student should be asked to find the keyword that has the same spelling pattern as the new word.

Compare-Contrast. Select two or three keywords the student has been learning. Write those keywords on index cards. As you display the cards, read them aloud to the student prompting the student to read them, “in your head.” Then write a sentence including a word that shares the word-ending spelling pattern with one of the keywords. Underline the target word in the sentence. Read the sentence aloud without saying the underlined word. Ask the student to point to the keyword that would “help you read the underlined word.” After the student has made a selection, compare and contrast the letters in the underlined word with the selected keyword. Point out any letters in the keyword that would be helpful. If correct, go on. If there is a better choice, tell the student, to “find the keyword that shares the whole spelling pattern. It will be even more helpful.”

Compare-Contrast can also be used as a spelling activity. Set up the activity the same way, but when writing the sentence, do not write the target word. When you read the sentence, say the word that is missing. Then tell the student, “Show me which of your keywords would help you spell the word ____.” After the student has selected the correct keyword, ask the student to use the keyword to help them actually spell the missing word.

Conclusion

All of the instructional activities described briefly here are described in much more detail in several general education resources. These resources do not describe how the activities would be done with students with complex communication needs. That is the purpose of this brief document. They do, however, provide a much more detailed description of the instructional activities. The most comprehensive resource for more information is:

Phonics They Use: Words for Reading and Writing by Patricia Cunningham

Personalized Key Words Planning Form

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(Word Ending list from Wylie & Durrell, 1970)

Word Ending	Personal Keyword	Word Ending	Personal Keyword
1. -ack	_____	20. -ide	_____
2. -ail	_____	21. -ight	_____
3. -ain	_____	22. -ill	_____
4. -ake	_____	23. -in	_____
5. -ale	_____	24. -ine	_____
6. -ame	_____	25. -ing	_____
7. -an	_____	26. -ink	_____
8. -ank	_____	27. -ip	_____
9. -ap	_____	28. -ir	_____
10. -ash	_____	29. -ock	_____
11. -at	_____	30. -oke	_____
12. -ate	_____	31. -op	_____
13. -aw	_____	32. -or	_____
14. -ay	_____	33. -ore	_____
15. -eat	_____	34. -uck	_____
16. -ell	_____	35. -ug	_____
17. -est	_____	36. -ump	_____
18. -ice	_____	37. -unk	_____
19. -ick	_____		