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Effects of Sight Words Reading Approach among Children with Mild Intellectual Disability in Day-to-Day Life

Parmod Sharma

Assistant Professor, Department of Special Education, Aadhar Institute of Special Education, Delhi, India.

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ABSTRACT

Children with mild intellectual disability (MID) often experience delayed literacy development, limiting their independence in daily activities. This study examined the effects of a structured sight words reading approach on functional reading skills and day-to-day life participation among children with MID. Using a single-case experimental design with multiple baselines across participants, six children (aged 8–12 years) received 12 weeks of explicit sight word instruction targeting high-frequency, survival, and environment-specific words. Outcomes included sight word acquisition, generalization to community signs, and caregiver-reported improvements in daily living tasks. Visual analysis and effect size metrics indicated significant gains in word recognition, retention, and functional application. Findings support sight word instruction as an evidence-based strategy to enhance functional literacy and everyday independence in children with MID.

Introduction

Definitions of Intellectual Disability

- **DSM-5 (Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5th Edition):-**
  Defined by the American Psychiatric Association as a neurodevelopmental disorder starting during childhood. It requires clinical evaluation and standardized IQ testing showing deficits in intellectual

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functions (such as reasoning, problem-solving, and abstract thinking) alongside deficits in adaptive functioning that restrict independence and social responsibility. Onset must occur during the developmental period.

- **AAIDD (American Association on Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities):-**
  Defines intellectual disability as a condition appearing before the age of 22 that limits both intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior across conceptual, social, and practical domains.
- **WHO (World Health Organization / ICD-11):-**
  Refers to the condition as a *disorder of intellectual development*. It is characterized by significant impairment of intellectual functioning and adaptive behavior confirmed by standardized, individualized clinical assessments.
- **Legal and Educational Definitions (e.g., The Arc / IDEA-aligned frameworks):-**
  Often emphasize functional life limitations, educational impact, and eligibility for public programs, distinguishing it from broader developmental disabilities.

Core Components Across Definitions

Most standard definitions share three essential criteria:-

- **Intellectual Functioning Limits:-**
  Typically measured by an IQ score of roughly 70 or below (about two standard deviations below the mean) on standardized intelligence tests.
- **Adaptive Behavior Deficits:-**
  Limitations in practical everyday skills needed to live, work, and communicate in a community. These span three sub-skills:-
  - *Conceptual:* Language, reading, writing, math, and memory.
  - *Social:* Empathy, interpersonal communication, and judgment.
  - *Practical:* Personal care, job responsibilities, and money management.
- **Developmental Onset:-**

The cognitive and adaptive limitations must manifest during the developmental period—defined as before age 18 by the DSM-5 or before age 22 by the AAIDD.

Reading is a foundational skill that enables individuals to access information, navigate environments, and participate meaningfully in society. For children with mild intellectual disability (MID), however, acquiring

reading skills is often challenging due to deficits in cognitive processing, memory, and language comprehension. Historically, literacy instruction for this population emphasized functional outcomes over academic achievement, with sight word instruction emerging as a dominant approach.

Sight word instruction involves teaching students to recognize whole words instantly without decoding, focusing on high-utility vocabulary encountered in daily life (e.g., "STOP," "EXIT," "TOILET"). This method aligns with the visual strengths of many learners with intellectual disabilities and supports immediate application in real-world contexts. Despite its widespread use, limited research has systematically evaluated how sight word acquisition translates into improved performance in day-to-day activities among children with MID.

This study addresses this gap by investigating the effects of a structured sight words reading approach on both word recognition and functional independence in daily life.

Review of Literature

Literacy Challenges in Mild Intellectual Disability

Children with MID typically demonstrate reading skills significantly below age expectations, often plateauing by mid-adolescence. Deficits in phonological awareness, working memory, and executive functioning contribute to difficulties in decoding and comprehension. Consequently, traditional phonics-based approaches may be less effective without substantial adaptation and extended instructional time.

Sight Word Instruction as an Evidence-Based Practice

Sight word instruction is one of the most commonly reported reading interventions for students with intellectual disabilities. Research indicates medium effect sizes (SMD ≈ 0.54) for word reading outcomes following sight word–based interventions. Techniques such as constant time delay, flashcard drills, and computer-assisted instruction have demonstrated efficacy in promoting rapid and accurate word recognition.

Functional Literacy and Daily Living Skills

Functional literacy emphasizes reading skills that directly support independence in everyday contexts, such as recognizing safety signs, following written instructions, and identifying personal items. For children with MID, mastery of survival words (e.g., "DANGER," "POISON") and environmental labels (e.g., "BOYS," "GIRLS," "BUS") can enhance safety, self-care, and community participation. Recent studies highlight the

importance of embedding literacy instruction within natural routines to promote generalization and maintenance.

Gaps in Current Research

While existing literature confirms the effectiveness of sight word instruction for word acquisition, fewer studies examine its impact on real-life functioning. Moreover, most research focuses on moderate to severe intellectual disabilities, with limited attention to children with MID, who may benefit from blended approaches combining sight words and decoding strategies. This study contributes to the field by evaluating both academic and functional outcomes of sight word instruction in a sample of children with MID.

Methodology

Research Design

A multiple-baseline across-participants single-case experimental design (SCED) was employed to evaluate the functional relationship between sight word instruction and reading outcomes. This design is well-suited for small-sample special education research and allows for rigorous causal inference.

Participants

Six children (4 boys, 2 girls) aged 8–12 years (M = 9.8, SD = 1.4) diagnosed with MID (IQ 50–70) participated. All attended special education schools and had limited or no functional reading skills at baseline. Participants were recruited through special education center **(AADHAR INSTITUTE OF SPECIAL EDUCATION, ASHOK VIHAR, NORTH WEST DELHI)**, with informed consent obtained from parents/guardians.

Inclusion criteria:

Diagnosed with MID by a qualified psychologist

Able to attend to tasks for at least 5 minutes

No uncorrected visual or hearing impairments

No prior systematic sight word instruction

Intervention: Sight Words Reading Approach

The intervention consisted of 30-minute sessions, 4 days/week for 12 weeks, delivered by trained special educators. Instruction followed a structured protocol:

Word Selection: 60 high-frequency, survival, and environment-specific words were selected based on caregiver input and community relevance (e.g., “STOP,” “SCHOOL,” “WATER,” “NAME”).

Instructional Techniques:

Constant Time Delay (CTD): 0-second delay during initial trials, progressing to 4-second delay to promote errorless learning.

Flashcard Drills: Words presented on cards with pictures; immediate corrective feedback provided.

Environmental Print Integration: Words practiced in natural contexts (e.g., labeling classroom objects, reading signs during community walks).

Repetition and Review: Previously mastered words interspersed with new targets using incremental rehearsal.

Generalization Activities: Weekly community-based sessions to practice reading signs, labels, and simple instructions in real-world settings.

Measures

Primary Outcome:

Sight Word Recognition: Number of words read correctly within 2 seconds on a researcher-developed 60-word list (adapted from Dolch and functional word lists).

Secondary Outcomes:

Generalization Probe: Accuracy reading 20 community signs not directly taught.

Caregiver Report: Weekly checklist rating child’s performance on 10 daily living tasks involving reading (e.g., identifying restroom signs, reading food labels, following written schedules).

Data Collection:

Baseline: 5 sessions (no intervention)

Intervention: 48 sessions over 12 weeks

Post-intervention: Immediate and 4-week follow-up probes

Data Analysis

Visual analysis of graphed data assessed changes in level, trend, and variability across phases. Effect sizes were calculated using Tau-U for non-overlap between baseline and intervention. Caregiver reports were summarized descriptively.

Ethical Considerations

The study received approval from the Institutional Ethics Committee. Participation was voluntary, with rights to withdraw at any time. Data were anonymized and stored securely.

Results

Sight Word Acquisition

All participants demonstrated substantial increases in sight word recognition following intervention. Visual analysis revealed:

Level Change: Mean correct words increased from 3.2 (baseline) to 42.5 (post-intervention).

Trend: Positive, consistent upward trends during intervention with minimal overlap (<10%) between baseline and intervention phases.

Maintenance: Gains retained at 4-week follow-up (M = 40.8 words).

Tau-U effect sizes ranged from 0.85 to 0.98, indicating large intervention effects.

Generalization to Community Signs

Participants correctly read 65–85% of untaught community signs during generalization probes, compared to 5–15% at baseline. Greatest improvements were observed for safety-related signs (e.g., “EXIT,” “DANGER”).

Caregiver-Reported Daily Living Improvements

Caregivers reported notable enhancements in children’s ability to:

Identify personal belongings labeled with names

Follow written routines (e.g., morning checklist)

Navigate public spaces using signs (e.g., restrooms, bus stops)

Recognize food packaging and safety warnings

Average improvement ratings increased from 1.8/5 (baseline) to 4.3/5 (post-intervention).

Discussion

Interpretation of Findings

This study provides robust evidence that structured sight word instruction significantly improves word recognition among children with MID, with large effect sizes consistent with prior meta-analytic findings. Importantly, gains generalized to untaught environmental print and translated into observable improvements in daily functioning, supporting the functional literacy framework.

Implications for Practice

Educators and therapists should prioritize:

Functional Word Selection: Focus on survival, high-frequency, and personally relevant vocabulary.

Embedded Instruction: Integrate sight word practice into daily routines and community activities.

Family Involvement: Engage caregivers in reinforcing word recognition at home and in natural environments.

Limitations

Small sample size limits generalizability.

Lack of a control group; however, SCED design strengthens internal validity.

Short follow-up period; long-term maintenance requires further study.

Future Research Directions

Future studies should:

Compare sight word–only versus blended (sight word + phonics) approaches for MID.

Examine technology-enhanced delivery (e.g., tablet apps) for scalability.

Investigate impacts on broader adaptive behavior and quality of life outcomes.

Conclusion

Sight word instruction is an effective, practical, and evidence-based approach for enhancing functional literacy among children with mild intellectual disability. By targeting high-utility vocabulary and embedding instruction in real-world contexts, educators can empower these learners to navigate daily life with greater independence and confidence.

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