

In Practice...

How C.O.W. Can Change the World of Emergent Readers

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Using current research regarding the power of Concept of Word instruction and emergent readers, two schools integrated the same program with substantial results. In this study, kindergarten students are divided into three groups: those that are developing letter knowledge, those with a rudimentary level of letter knowledge understanding, and those with a firm understanding of letter knowledge. Although the lessons are comparable, the Concept of Word activities are scaffolded to promote foundational reading skills. The first school, where the program was developed, has been using this particular pedagogical approach with fidelity for three years in their kindergarten classrooms. Their year-ending PALS identified are as follows; spring, 2011 – zero children identified, spring, 2012 – zero children identified, spring 2013 – zero children identified. The second school is in the first year of implementation. Although the first year results are not yet complete, the preliminary results are encouraging.

Current literacy research shows that Concept of Word development serves as a valid and reliable kindergarten predictor of first grade reading achievement. 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.

Blackwell-Bullock, Invernizzi, Drake, Howell (2009), p. 30

As reading specialists, we've always known the importance of teaching concept of word, however knowing and understanding are two separate things. It wasn't until the release of the 2009 VSRA Reading in Virginia article "Concept of Word in Text: An Integral Literacy Skill" that it finally came home to roost. While most of our students met the spring PALS benchmarks they were unable to meet the benchmarks in the concept of word portion.

After reading the article we realized that we had been teaching all of our kindergarten students with the same concept of word text. The article gave us a better understanding of the developmental levels we should be addressing. This article includes the reflections of Beth Estill, Reading Specialist at Malibu Elementary and Cathy Collier, Reading Specialist at Great Bridge Primary and their journey in developing concept of word. Malibu

Elementary is a K-5 school with 400 students. It is located in Virginia Beach, Virginia and has a large military population. The school has 43% of the students receiving free and reduced lunch. Great Bridge Primary is a K-2 school with 580. It is located in Chesapeake, Virginia. The school has a 22% free and reduced population.

Overview of PALS

Early literacy screening is the key to providing effective literacy instruction and preventing future reading problems. The Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) provides a comprehensive assessment of young children’s knowledge of the important literacy fundamentals that are predictive of future reading success. PALS is the state-provided screening tool for Virginia’s Early Intervention Reading Initiative (EIRI) and is used by 99% of school divisions in the state on a voluntary basis.

PALS consists of three instruments, PALS-PreK (for preschool students), PALS-K (for kindergartners), and PALS 1-3 (for students in Grades 1-3). PALS assessments are designed to identify students in need of additional reading instruction beyond that provided to typically developing readers. The PALS assessments guide teachers’ instruction by providing them with explicit information about their students’ knowledge of literacy fundamentals. Mid-year assessment and PALS Quick Checks allow for ongoing student progress monitoring throughout the year.

Virginia’s Early Intervention Reading Initiative

The Early Intervention Reading Initiative was initially established by the 1997 Virginia Acts of Assembly. Monies were allocated to help participating school divisions identify children in need of additional instruction and to provide early intervention services to those students with diagnosed needs. School divisions that chose to participate were able to implement the initiative in either kindergarten or first grade. In the 2000-2001 legislative session, the Governor and General Assembly provided funding to expand the EIRI through third grade.

Virginia Department of Education

Development of the Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening was supported by the Virginia Department of Education through Virginia’s Early Intervention Reading Initiative. Without the support of the VDOE, the research and development required for this assessment would not be possible. (“Background of PALS,” 2014).

What is Concept of Word in Text?

Concept of Word is the “culmination of a student’s automatic knowledge of letter sounds, the ability to isolate beginning consonant sounds and their ability to remember words in isolation that were viewed previously in text (Blackwell-Bullock, Invernizzi, Drake & Howell, 2009). Readers use these skills simultaneously and without thought.

What will daily Concept of Word instruction do for literacy?

Exposure to daily Concept of Word instruction leads to several positive outcomes in the life of a developing reader. First, direct and consistent instruction strengthens a student's speech-to-print match. Secondly, explicit instruction and practice develops a student's alphabet knowledge and phonemic awareness; therefore, building a broader knowledge of how these skills can be applied. Thirdly, instruction with Concept of Word will develop student's knowledge of words in print; consequently building a larger body of known words.

What are the levels of Concept of Word?

In the article, *Concept of Word in Text: An Integral Literacy Skill*, the authors explain each level (2009). Students start at the **Developing Level**. The stage is characterized by having the ability to identify words that rhyme but cannot accurately point to the words they are saying; they do not understand one-to-one correspondence; and typically, do not have complete alphabet and letter sound knowledge. This stage is represented by a score of 0-3 on the concept of word portion of the PALS assessment.

The intermediate or **Rudimentary Level** is distinguished by students who can accurately point or track words as they say the rhyme; however they may get off track on two-syllable words but are frequently able to self-correct; and may be able to

correctly identify some words in the context of the text but **not** in isolation.

The final stage of Concept of Word is the **Firm Level**. This is demonstrated when the students 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; and can identify the same words previously seen in context, in isolation on a word list.

Beth's Story

Using these three levels as a guide I wanted to develop a series of daily lessons which could be implemented into small group instruction in the kindergarten classroom. Previously, we had used nursery rhymes and short poems with all of our students. However, some students were developmentally not ready for four or more lines of text and all that it entailed based on their letter sound knowledge.

The PALS concept of word process was followed; however the number of lines of text was greatly reduced for students at the developing level. For our weakest students, who were unable to identify many letters and sounds, we used a single line of text with a matching picture to serve as a guide. Additionally, students were provided with a concept of word lesson every day for the entire school year.

If students could identify **most** of their letters (upper and lower case) and make letter sound associations **most** of the time they were ready for the rudimentary level. This level consisted of four lines of

rhyiming text along with a picture representation for each line.

Finally, if students were able to map beginning, middle, and ending sounds in their writing they were still provided with concept of word lessons each day during small group instruction. These lessons were short rhyiming poems of various lengths without a picture representation.

Once the students' levels for COW were identified, the teachers and I discovered a direct correlation between COW levels and the students' word study levels. The following framework was used for the different levels.

**Concept of Word in Text Lesson
Framework: Developing Directions**



DAY 1

1. Use a picture representation of the text to model how to recite the text by pointing to the picture several times while reciting the sentence. (Figure 1.)
2. Say the first sentence. Instruct students to echo the sentence while pointing to the picture. Repeat.

Next, instruct the students to chorally say the sentence with you several times.

3. Finally, ask the students to state the sentence independently while pointing to the picture prompt.
4. Repeat as often as necessary until the text is known by heart.
5. Distribute six chips to each student instructing them to place them on the row of gray boxes.
6. Instruct students to watch while you model pushing a chip for each word while saying the memorized sentence. Identify the number of words in the sentence.
7. Instruct students to say the sentence and push a chip for each word. Monitor to ensure the students are pushing only one chip per word.
8. If the students demonstrate an understanding of the number of the words in the sentence then go to the second sentence. If not, stop with one sentence that day.

Figure 1. Modeling Concept of Word.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
						
						

Sentence 1: *The books sat on the shelf.*

Sentence 2: *I built a snowman.*

DAY 2

1. Review the sentence(s) from the previous day through echo, choral, and independent practice.
2. Distribute the actual text to each student (Figure 2). Read the sentence to students while pointing to each word.
3. Instruct students to **echo** read and point to each word.
4. Instruct students to **choral** read the text and point to each word. Prompt students: "Now let's read it together. Eyes on the page. Read it with me as we point to each word."
5. Invite the student to recite the text while pointing to the words. "This time I want you to do what I did. Point to each word as you say it. Be sure to touch each word as you say it."
6. Repeat with the second sentence.
7. If the students experience difficulty, repeat day 2 on day 3, if not follow the directions below for day 3.

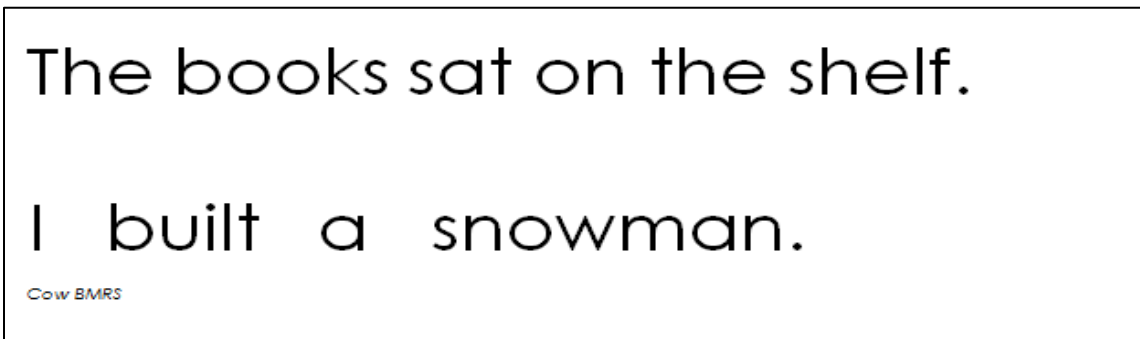


Figure 2. Actual text.

DAY 3

1. Distribute the text from the previous day to the students. Instruct students to **chorally** "read" the text while pointing to each word.
2. After repeated reading ask the students to identify 1-2 words in the text.
3. Distribute a paper copy of sentence one to each student. Demonstrate how to cut the sentence apart, and then instruct students to cut their sentence apart (Figure 3.)
4. Ask students to push and say each word in the sentence several times.
5. Instruct students to scramble the words and then attempt to put back into the right order. If a student struggles provide the student with the original copy of the sentence to match.

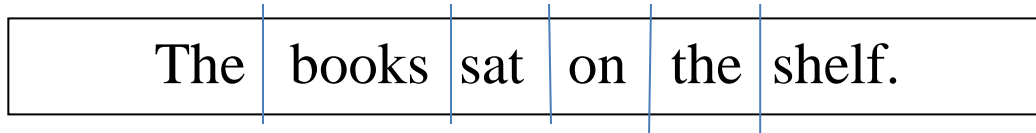


Figure 3. Demonstrating cutting the text.

DAY 4

1. Redistribute the cut up sentences to the students. Ask students to match each word card to its counterpart in the text.
2. Distribute several word cards from the text and give to the students.
3. Ask students to identify the word based on matching them to the word in the sentence.
4. Practice with both sentences.

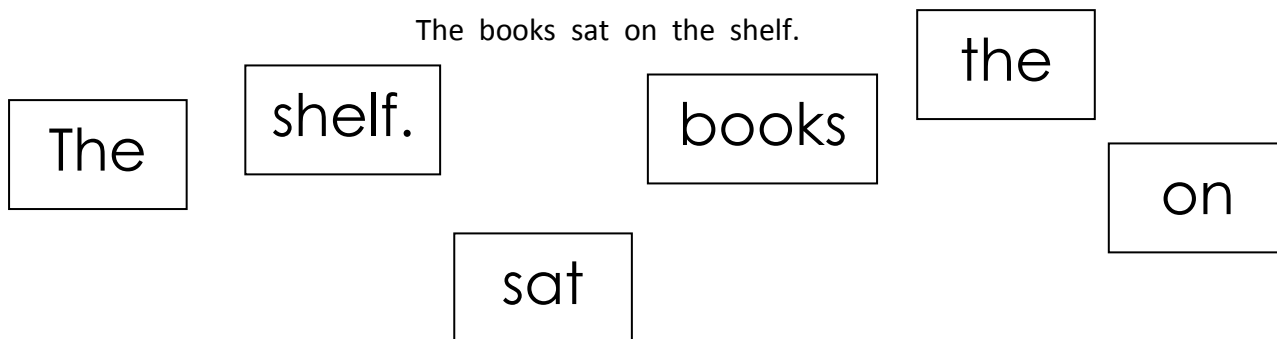


Figure 4. Redistribute the cut up sentences.

DAY 5

1. Distribute several word cards from the text (Figure 5).
2. Ask students to identify the word out of context. Some students may need support from the sentence to accomplish this.






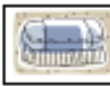
Figure 5: Word cards from the text.

The teachers and students followed the above procedure until students knew all of their letters, most of their sounds, and demonstrated that knowledge by writing beginning and ending letters for dictated words and in their daily writing. For those students who began the year knowing no letters or sounds this lasted almost to the end of the first semester before they were able to proceed to the rudimentary text.

Concept of Word in Text Lesson

Framework: Rudimentary

The same procedures were followed for those students in rudimentary concept of word using longer pieces of text. However, each student is given a line of text to cut and order. The entire group creates the poem.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
						
						
						
						

There were five little ducklings,
swimming in the tub.
Their mother got the soap
and gave them all a scrub.

Figure 6. Rudimentary concept of word instruction.

Concept of Word in Text Lesson

Framework: Firm

For students in firm concept of word using longer pieces of text, the same procedures were followed with the exception that students didn't cut the

sentences apart but rather were asked to read individual lines of text out of order. The text also does not contain picture support.

What Time Is It?

What time is it?
 What time is it?
 What time is it today?
 It's time for bed.
 Put down your head.
 It's time for sleep today.

it	today	what	time	put
down	your	it's	sleep	head

Figure 7. Firm concept of word instruction.

Beth's Data

Using this process with fidelity over the last three years, our school has identified **no kindergarten students** at the spring PALS testing. We continue to believe that by providing our students with daily differentiated concept of word lessons along with differentiated word study and leveled text lessons our students are maximizing their potential. All our teachers and teaching assistants are carefully trained each year through modeled lessons and coaching sessions.

Cathy's Story

My principal was introduced to the importance of the Concept of Word subtest at a principal's meeting in August. She

asked that all students in first grade be tested, in addition to the kindergarten student requirement; therefore, we had a baseline for all kindergarten and first grade students. She and I were invited to a Concept of Word Workshop given by Beth in November. This year we were both new to our school. We had very little prior knowledge of the students, other than the data on the paper. We could identify our struggling readers, but were very interested in providing small group targeted instruction.

After the workshop, the principal and I divided roles in this process. She looked at the PALS History and Data. She was able to look at the COW data on students currently in first, second, and third

grade. There was a clear connection between a low COW score in kindergarten and students that continued to struggle in reading. MOST of the students that had low PALS COW scores and continued to struggle were seen by our ESTAT (RtI) team for interventions or had been found eligible for special education.

I was tasked with implementing this program in our school. The workshop was on a Tuesday and we began implementing the process for our developing students the following week. We decided rather than put another thing on the teacher's plate, I would train our teacher assistants to implement this process with our weakest students. The teacher assistants were provided all the materials necessary. Additionally, I modeled the process during the training, then after allowing an opportunity to practice with their students, I observed a lesson and had individual conferences for feedback and questions. Because they wanted a clear demonstration with students, I videotaped myself with some students for an entire week. These videos were put on our shared drive at school and the teacher assistants could look at them when they wanted.

We noticed several things right away. First, the teacher assistants were talking to each other about the process. They were asking each other questions and helping each other perfect the process. Second, the teacher assistants were providing the teachers with valuable information about the students through their data and their discussions. But best of

all, the teacher assistants were empowered as part of the learning process for these students. They took pride in the job and were excited to share student results.

Cathy's Data

We continued with the developing level until the January Mid-Year PALS test. The scores revealed progress for the majority of our students. Our first grade group consisted of 39 first grade students who did not reach the firm level of COW on the fall PALS test. With the nine weeks of interventions, all but eight students scored in the firm range. Of the eight that did not reach the firm level, six students moved from the beginning level to the rudimentary level. The other two students did not make progress. It should also be noted that six of the eight students (although not the same six as previously mentioned) are students who receive special education services. Our second group was comprised of kindergarten students who were not at the firm level in the fall. Kindergartners are not expected to be at the firm level until the end of the year, so this technique was used as a skill builder. 97 out of 141 kindergartners were in this group. The kindergarten teacher assistants met with these students in small groups. 21 of the 97 students met with me for additional help or "double-dosing," as well. On the Mid-Year benchmark, 13 additional students to the firm level and 58 of the remaining kindergartners moved from beginning to rudimentary.

Now What?

Using this Mid-Year PALS data, new groups were formed based on the PALS data. We also trained our teacher assistants to use the rudimentary level techniques and students were given instruction at their level, either developing or rudimentary. We are anxious to see our final results in the Spring.

Looking forward to next year, we will start the COW activities before the Fall PALS test. We will divide kindergartners into groups based on letter knowledge. We will immediately work with students in first

grade who were identified by the Spring PALS scores.

Final Thoughts

Although the schools are different in their student demographics, they are similar in their need to ensure all students have a firm, developmentally appropriate foundation for reading success. Using these prescribed activities at the appropriate levels, enhances all students' learning. The program meets the children where they are, and takes them to where they need to go.

References

Background for PALS. (2014). Retrieved March 24, 2014, from <https://pals.virginia.edu/rd-background.html>

Blackwell-Bullock, R., Invernizzi, M., Drake, E. A., & Howell, J. L. (2009). Concept of Word in Text: An Integral Literacy Skill. *Reading In Virginia*, 31, 30-35.