Tips for teaching high frequency words - with Christina Winter

Triple R Teaching Podcast #228

Hello, this is Anna Geiger, author of *Reach All Readers* and creator of the Reach All Readers website. Today I'm welcoming back Christina Winter to the podcast for the third time. This time she's going to be talking about quick tips for teaching high frequency words. This is part of our series from teachers, learning about practical ways that we can apply the science of reading. Here we go!

Anna Geiger:

Welcome back, Christina!

Christina Winter:

Hi, Anna. So happy to be here today!

Anna Geiger:

I'm so glad to have you here, my real life friend and my online friend. You've been on the podcast twice already, and now we're here for the third time to talk about sight words and high frequency words, what those truly are and how we can best teach those.

Before we do that, can you reintroduce yourself?

Christina Winter:

Hey everyone, I'm Christina Winter and you probably know me from the website, Lead in Literacy. It was formerly Mrs. Winter's Bliss for a decade, and about a year ago we rebranded to Lead in Literacy because we just have a heart to work with teachers, K-2 teachers, in literacy.

I'm a former public school teacher. I taught for 21 years. Just going really quickly back, I was taught and trained in balanced literacy, and so that's everything I did to teach my first graders how to read and write.

Over the last five years, I've been really excited diving into all the PD, the webinars, the podcasts, books like Anna's, podcasts like Anna's, LETRS, and Reading Teachers Top 10 Tools. I'm just really excited to get to continue to support teachers in evidence-based professional development and providing tools and strategies and all of that.

I'm really excited to be here and talk about high frequency words today.

Anna Geiger:

Today we're going to talk about how to effectively teach high frequency words in a way that aligns with research versus having kids memorize.

Before we do that, let's talk about definitions. For sight words, what do people typically think of that to be? What really are sight words and then high frequency words as well?

Christina Winter:

Yeah, I'm glad we're talking about this first. When I was teaching for, like I said, 21 years, I called them sight words. We had folders that said sight word folders, a sight word wall, all the things, right? We called them sight words.

In actuality, if you look to the reading experts like Dr. Linnea Ehri, Katie Pace-Miles, and David Kilpatrick, we know that all words want to be sight words because the true definition of a sight word is any word that you've orthographically mapped that you can read with automaticity, accurately, and effortlessly. You can just look at the word and know exactly what it says.

But as teachers, I think what we think of sight words are really high frequency words. They're words that often show up in print, those words that emergent readers need to read often like the words "the, to, and, of, he, from, they."

Some teachers might use words that are high frequency words, or what they refer to as sight words, from the Dolch word list or the Fry word list and all of that.

What we do know is all words are actually sight words, but we'll differentiate these words that come up often in print as high frequency words.

We know that some of these words are actually decodable words, like the words "can," "ask," and "big." Those words are actually very decodable.

Then there are some high frequency words that have irregular parts, parts that don't match the expected phoneme-grapheme correspondence, like the words "said" or "they."

So that's the differentiation between high frequency and sight words.

Anna Geiger:

In the past, many of us had students memorize sight words, like we would just show them the card, we'd say the word, and they'd repeat it. There wasn't really a breaking down of the sounds. It was just, let's memorize this word as a whole. Why is that a problem?

Christina Winter:

Yeah, so up until recently, we thought that kids had to learn them with these rote memorization methods. Like you said, I used to assign flashcards and word lists. I would actually say to parents, "Don't decode the words; your child has to just read it in a snap." We somehow had this belief that if a child saw the word enough times that they would eventually just learn it. We sent home word lists, we told them to memorize them, and we drilled them with flashcards.

It did work for some children. That's the thing. Sometimes we think, "It's working! It's working!"

No, it worked for some, but not for all. We do know from the research that we don't store and retrieve words based on visual memory, but rather we learn words through orthographic mapping. That's where our students use their language processing part of their brain, because they want to map the sounds of the words to what they already know, the phonemes and the letters, so that they can connect the sound to symbol. They permanently store those sounds and symbols, in addition to meaning, so that these words become part of their sight word memory. That is a better way.

Anna Geiger:

Of course, like you said, it can seem like memorizing words by their shape is working because some kids really do have a capacity for memorizing lots of shapes of words. But we hear about some kids who do that for years, and then when they get to second or third grade, it backfires. They might be someone with dyslexia who can memorize things, but then they haven't learned how to sound them out.

Or we hear teachers, like kindergarten teachers, who say, "I have this list of a hundred words I have to teach them to memorize, and I thought they knew them, but now that I'm getting to word sixty, they're forgetting word one." That's because they've never mapped them. They've just tried to memorize them by shape, and your brain can only do so much of that.

That's why it's important to start by sounding them out.

Can you talk to us a little bit about some techniques for teaching these words versus flashing them on a card and having them just memorize it?

Christina Winter:

We want to really explicitly teach the word. We want to tell the child the word. We want to use the word in a sentence to build up the meaning so they understand what the word is, and maybe even connect it to a picture if we can.

We're just going to really explicitly teach that word. We're going to say the word, we're going to identify how many sounds are in the word, and we're going to map the sound to the symbol.

So if we're using the word "big" as an example, we're going to count out those three sounds, we're going to talk about what's the first sound, what's the middle sound, and what's the ending sound. We're going to write the letters that represent those sounds, that match the sound with the symbol.

After we map the sounds to the symbols, we point out or analyze with students the irregular part of the word. By bringing them to focus and pay attention to that, it really helps them. We're not asking them to just memorize the word as a whole, but memorize that tricky part.

A lot of teachers call this heart words. It's engaging for kids to notice or point out the tricky part, the heart part. We can mark it with a little heart. But the important thing is that we're really looking at the sounds and the symbols and analyzing those tricky parts, the irregular parts of the words.

Anna Geiger:

Do you have any suggestions for practice opportunities after you've explicitly taught the word?

Christina Winter:

Yes. A couple of important things to keep in mind is that… In the past, we just said… Like what you said about that kindergarten class had to learn those hundred words.

We know that best practice is that we're putting our words into groups and we're teaching them within our word study or our phonics lessons.

If we're teaching short e, that would be the time when we're adding the word "ten." We can add that irregular word "said" because we can make that connection. "Yes, we hear the /ĕ/ sound, but we're not actually spelling it with the E. We spell the word 'said,' as S-A-I-D."

We're following a scope and sequence. We're matching words to our phonics skills and working those words within our word study that we're teaching our students.

Another thing that we really should keep in mind, and as experienced teachers we know, things like the words “of” and “for” are often confusing for students. They swap those out all the time. Or the words “where” and “were,” “then” and “they.” So we want to maybe separate those out and focus on those words so that kids are not being confused. We can also talk about how they're similar and how they're different with students after we've taught those.

I always said with my teachers, it’s more bang for the buck! Let's group words that have similar patterns. So if you're teaching the word “could,” you can also teach the word “would” and “should” because they have similar patterns. “He,” “be,” “we,” “me,” those words have similar patterns.

We want to be following that scope and sequence, making sure that we're eliminating confusions or drawing attention to words that could be similar and confusing for students, and grouping words with similar patterns. Those are really great things to keep in mind as we're teaching our students after we've taught those words.

Anna Geiger:

It’s planning for when to teach them strategically and then explicitly teaching the word. Would you say that after those things have been done, there's room for flashcards? Or do you have other suggestions for practice opportunities?

Christina Winter:

You could do flashcards. You could, if you have the literacy center opportunity. But I think what's so great is just building it into your other instructional routines. They don't have to be this separate thing that we're doing.

So if you're doing dictation, use some of those words and say, “Oh my goodness, we've been working on the word ‘from,’ and here it is in our sentence!”

If they're reading decodable texts, ask students to be circling the word that is a high frequency word that we've been practicing this week.

It’s just giving more opportunities. We know that our young students need lots of opportunities and repetition for practice.

I just don't think it has to be... Back in my day of teaching, I had a sight word center, and I'm not saying that's a bad thing. I actually have resources where we do have word mapping little templates that kids can do at a center. It's not a bad thing, but I just think it’s great to have it as part of all of your instructional routines and talking about it with your students.

Anna Geiger:

Yeah, and understanding that when you're teaching kids to read these, what might be perceived as irregular words, there's always room for opinion about what's truly irregular and what's not, but their brain's doing the same thing as it's doing with other words. We're not doing something entirely new and different.

When I was talking to Leslie Laud about ThinkSRSD, she talked about something she called a close copy. You would have this list of high frequency words next to you during your writing, so that might be something teachers would do. They’d have a running list of words that the kids would add their new words to, what we might consider irregular or tricky words that kids tend to mix up, and they're

responsible for spelling those correctly. So it's not just having to look at a wall, but having this close copy right next to them so they can find those words and they're accountable for them.

I think there's something to be said for that too, because it's not just about reading, it's about spelling them.

Christina Winter:

Exactly. Yes.

Anna Geiger:

Thank you so much, Christina! Do you have anything else to share before we close off? Actually maybe you could talk about your new endeavor that's not live as we talk, but it will be by the time this goes live.

Christina Winter:

First of all, I want to give your listeners… Teachers are busy, right? I'll give you a website link that they can just click over to, you don't even have to put in your email address or anything, but I have a scope and sequence built out. It has all the phonics skills with the matching 220 Dolch words on the list. Just print it out and put it in your plan book so you know, "This week I'm working on long vowel A. Here are the words that align with that." So yeah, go grab that.

Then for me right now, the big project I'm working on is making reading accessible at home for students who seem to be struggling a bit with reading and have parents who want to help but just don't know how to help. I'm recording lessons teaching students, and it's going to be great because parents can just help their child log in, push play, and I'm going to deliver instruction that is aligned with all the evidence of what children need and giving lots of practice opportunities.

We're just really excited. Maybe by the time this podcast episode airs, Sure Start Reading will be out in the world, and I just can't wait to see all these little readers!

Anna Geiger:

That's very exciting. I'm excited to see it and to share that with other people.

Thanks so much for all you do, Christina, and thanks for coming back.

Christina Winter:

Thanks, Anna!

Anna Geiger:

You can find the show notes for this episode at reachallreaders.com/episode228. Talk to you next time!

Closing:

That's all for this episode of Triple R Teaching. For more educational resources, visit Anna at her home base, reachallreaders.com, and join our teaching community. We look forward to helping you reflect, refine, and recharge on the next episode of Triple R Teaching.