



THE SENTENCE MASTER

A New Approach for Problem Readers

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The Sentence Master is a revolutionary, linguistically-based reading program that integrates computer activities and print materials. It is designed for students who have had difficulty, or are expected to have difficulty, in mastering the critical skill of literacy.

The Sentence Master is at the forefront of programs that link diagnosis to intervention. It uses innovative, structured, and highly motivating materials to address and overcome the language deficits that we now know exist in the vast majority of poor readers. These include deficits in the areas of naming, syntax, and comprehension.

Before outlining the philosophy and design features of *The Sentence Master*, it is useful to set it within the context of the major developments that have been taking place in the field of reading disabilities and reading instruction.

THE PROBLEMS OF POOR READERS

Beyond a Visual Deficit

From the standpoint of diagnosis, the past two to three decades have been remarkable. We now know far more than we ever did about the problems disabled readers face when they look at the printed page (Stanovich, 1985; Vellutino, 1987). And, what we now know is far different from what was formerly thought to be the case.

For many years, studies of poor readers focused on the supposition that visual processing problems were central to their difficulties (Orton, 1937). This was only reasonable; after all, almost all of them seemed to have mastered their spoken language, but were not mastering their written language.

The salient difference between the two systems is the sensory modality. Spoken language primarily involves the auditory modality while written language primarily involves the visual one. From this perspective, it was an easy jump to conclude that failure with written language was based on problems in processing visual information.

In some cases, this was, and is, true. Visual problems can account for some reading difficulties. But, as summarized by Keith Stanovich, the overwhelming conclusion of this line of research is that “deficits in visual processing account for an extremely small proportion of the variance in reading ability” (1985, p.70).

A New Understanding

The visual deficit hypothesis was based on an erroneous assumption. It assumed that individuals who were speaking, and often speaking rather well, did not have problems in oral language. The mistake was understandable. Articulate speech is an amazingly complex affair and one can easily be led to think that a person who speaks well has a fully intact language system.

Nevertheless, we know that people can speak in amazingly intricate, persuasive, and effective ways — and still have significant language problems. The problems do not run the gamut of abilities; instead they affect selected areas of skill.

The phenomenon is so common that each of us has probably experienced it in one form or another. It is behind the uncomfortable feeling that arises when we have problems remembering names, pronouncing a long, cumbersome word, or figuring out the meaning of a particularly complicated sentence.



Language is not 'of a piece.' It is a complicated tapestry that, even when it is quite beautiful, can have many knots and holes. Often, the imperfections are so small that they can be overlooked. But then there are other times — times when the language imperfections become central. Then, they must be carefully examined and corrected!

This is precisely what has happened in the area of reading research. The findings from widely varying approaches have pointed, again and again, to a group of language problems that are responsible for the vast bulk of reading failures (Blank, 1978, 1985; Liberman, 1982; Vellutino, 1987).

NAMING OR LABELING

The Problem

A chief language difficulty among poor readers concerns problems in 'naming' (Denckla & Rudel, 1976; Jansky & DeHirsch, 1973; Mattis, French & Rapin, 1975). For example, a typical test involves showing pictures of common objects which have to be labeled (e.g., pictures of a *comb*, *clock*, *umbrella*, *key* and *scissors*). This is a simple task — notable only for the fact that each object appears many times so that the person sees, and has to name, 40 to 50 objects. In other words, the person carrying out the task has to repeatedly call up labels. As a result, it is not just a process of calling up a few names, but rather coming up with labels one after the other. This is termed confrontational naming.

Under these conditions, poor readers have a much harder time than do others. They generally do not have problems knowing the objects, or even remembering the names. They simply take far longer to retrieve the names than do their peers. Whereas the average student might take 30 seconds to complete the labeling of all the objects, a poor reader of the same age might take anywhere from 60 to 120 seconds.

How does this relate to reading? Reading, particularly early reading, involves calling up names; not the names of things but the names of words. Basically, it is the same confrontational naming process that was required in the test just described. Even when poor readers can recognize the words they have to decode, the deficit causes their reading to be slow and tedious. Each page of text is almost unbearable; and the more text that appears, the more unbearable it becomes.

The Treatment

This weakness, or deficit of poor readers, has been recognized now for many years. But the diagnosis has not led to any significant effects on intervention. There are

good reasons why the problem has been avoided. It is hard to imagine how one can speed up the naming process in any systematic way.

The one major technique that we know of is overlearning — that is, having many, many trials so that the word, or words, being trained are learned to a point of immediate recognition. In the jargon of the field, this achievement is termed automaticity. All of us have had some experience with this process. It is what accounts for our instant identification of a **STOP** sign. The word has been seen so often that it is overlearned and therefore immediately available without any conscious processing.

How can this technique be useful in the general training of reading? There are so many words in the language. Which ones should be overtrained? And even if some words are learned through overtraining, there are so many other words remaining. The overtrained words would seem to be no more than 'a drop in the bucket.' This view of matters has left interventionists stymied as to how to use the important diagnosis of 'naming problems' to guide changes in instruction.

The Two Groups of Words

But there is a way — a way that comes from understanding our language system. English, like many other languages, is composed of two basic categories: content words and non-content words.

Content words are the nouns, verbs and adjectives that make up the bulk of our language. They are a vast array of words that can range:

- from simple (CAR) to complex (VEHICULAR);
- from single syllable (BAD) to multi-syllable (CATASTROPHE); and
- from familiar (BIBLE) to strange (APOCRYPHA).

What they have in common is their reference to reality; that is, they refer to some *event*, *thing*, *action*, or *attribute* which people can think about, perceive or sense.

Among their other attributes, content words are an **open** class of words. They forever allow new entries. For instance, words such as ASTRONAUT, YUPPIE, and VIDEO JOCKEY did not exist some years ago. As new ideas come into being, new content words are created. Given their richness and meaning, content words are the words that have dominated the instruction of reading.

Non-content words are the parts of speech which are classified under such categories as *articles*, *pronouns*, and *prepositions*. They also include bound morphemes such as -S, -ED, and -ING which have no meaning unless they are affixed to a word.

Frequency is one of their most notable characteristics. To illustrate, the ten most frequently used words in written material ranked in order of occurrence are THE, OF, AND, A, TO, IN, IS, YOU, THAT, and IT (Carroll, Davies, & Richman, 1971). No content word in the language can even approach the frequency of these words.

For good reason, non-content words are often referred to as the closed class of words. That means they are restricted to a certain, unchanging number. In English, that number is approximately two hundred. (And even this limited number is somewhat exaggerated because it includes rarely used, rather esoteric non-content words such as HERETOFORE and WHENCE.) Unlike the class of content words, the non-content words are an elite group that keeps out all newcomers.

They may be small, but they certainly are powerful! A glance at any page of text will soon show that the non-content words occupy 50% or more of the words that a reader has to decode. To illustrate, consider the two segments of text below. One is from a second grade reader; the other from a text for adults. In both cases, the non-content words (whether unbound such as IS or bound such as -ED) are in boldface and have been counted to show their prevalence.

First the text for children:

It is April 10, 1912. **The** whole world **is** talking about **an** amazing new ship. **Its** name **is** the Titanic. **The** ship **is** getting ready **to** leave **on** its first trip **across** the ocean. **It is** going all **the** way **from** England **to** America.

(25 non-content units out of 42 words)
from *The Titanic - Lost and Found*
J. Donnelly, N.Y., Random House, 1987.

Now the text for adults:

America **was** the best-kept secret **in** history. **Before** Columbus **the** peoples **of** Europe **did not even** imagine **that this** continent **was** here. **Their** maps **and** globes showed **only** Europe, Asia **and** Africa **and** left **no** room **for another** continent. **The** greatest surprise **was** that **there really was an** America.

(33 non-content units out of 50 words)
from *The Landmark History*
of the American People
D. J. Boorstein, N.Y., Random House, 1987.

So here we have it — a limited, closed class of words that dominates any text readers may see, whether they are at the start of the reading process or years into it. Over-

learning of any and all words is clearly an impossibility. But overlearning the small set of non-content words is clearly within the realm of possibility. And the payoff from this overlearning is immense. It enables a reader to be prepared to instantly decode half or more of any text he or she will ever encounter.

Teaching the Limited, Closed Class

Designers of reading programs have long sensed the power of these words. They are part of the 'sight words' taught in almost every reading program. What the designers have not done, however, is to take account of the naming problems that poor readers have. As a result, they do not overtrain each word before proceeding to the next. Instead, they cluster a number of the sight words together and go through them as a group. The limited exposure may be adequate for individuals who are adept at reading, but it is far from adequate for individuals with reading problems.

As you will soon see, overtraining is a major feature of *The Sentence Master*. All the words are presented and taught prior to the stories in which they will appear. Words such as THE, IS, HERE, and CAN are offered — with approximately 40 to 50 trials available for each word. Slight variations are introduced into the trials to hold the learner's interest and attention. But the slow-paced, highly repetitive overlearning that is required is always there. This is a vital feature of the program. The four levels of *The Sentence Master*, in combination, teach over 100 of the most common non-content words and bound morphemes. All the words taught at one level are maintained in the succeeding levels so that review and retention are ensured.

Repetition Need Not Be Boring

Overlearning, which is a key principle of *The Sentence Master*, is achieved through high levels of repetition. Skilled readers may find this component curious and even unnecessary because their competence frees them from the need for this sort of teaching. But it is precisely what unskilled readers require. They are also willing to move at a slow, repetitive pace — if the experience is fun and productive. *The Sentence Master* is designed to ensure both.

At the same time, you, the adult, are the determiner of what the learner should do. The program has been designed to allow you to select, for each and every one of the words that is taught, the range of tasks that will be presented. If you see that the student can progress effectively with fewer trials, you are able to set the program accordingly. However, when in doubt, err in the direction of providing more rather than fewer trials. Further, you should always ensure that the students complete the Spelling component of the

word training. This component is vital to helping the student become aware of all the letters contained in any word.

SYNTAX

The Problem

Another spoken language deficit spotlighted through modern research concerns problems with syntax; that is, problems with the grammar of the language (Johnson & Grant, 1989). In raising this area, we are not referring to difficulties students may have in learning grammatical categories (such as knowing how to identify *nouns, verbs, subjects, predicates*, etc.). They may well have problems in this realm, but these are not the ones at issue.

Instead, their problems reside in the skills underlying the production and comprehension of complex sentences. Their difficulties can be seen when they are given tests in which they have to imitate complicated sentences or complete sentences that contain omissions (Newcomer & Magee, 1977; Wiig, Semel & Crouse, 1973; Vogel, 1974). Under these conditions, the unskilled reader is prone to leave out words or to shift words in ways that significantly affect the meaning.

Syntax problems are of great significance in comprehension. To illustrate, let's take the relatively simple sentence:

HE WALKED TO THE DOG.

but let us assume that it has been perceived as:

HE WALKED THE DOG.

The deletion of the little two letter word TO has dramatically transformed the meaning of the sentence.

When one extends this type of problem to the full text of a book, one can begin to understand some of the comprehension problems that have been reported. It helps to explain, for instance, the problems poor readers have in using the text they are reading, at the moment, to predict the text that they will be reading, a few moments hence; in other words, to predict what will be appearing next on the page. Essentially, the limited and distorted meanings they glean from the text do not provide them with the input needed for effective anticipation of the text. Syntax problems are, of course, not responsible for all comprehension difficulties. They do, however, play a major role.

The Treatment

Like naming problems, syntax problems have been identified for over two decades as a deficit in poor readers. As in the case of naming problems, relatively little has been done to alter the teaching material to address these problems.

The major efforts undertaken thus far have focused on metalinguistic strategies which are designed to lead students to reason about the text so that they will monitor it in a more careful fashion (Bransford et al, 1982; Brown, 1981; Clark, 1988; White, Pascarella & Pflaum, 1981). For example, a series of questions may be presented prior to seeing the actual material itself. The hope is that the questions will guide the reading that follows.

Cognitive strategies of this sort are vital, but they are often insufficient or inappropriate for many readers, particularly those in the early acquisition stages. As in the HE WALKED TO THE DOG example, syntax problems mean that much information will not be taken in correctly. Asking students to reason about that information will not be helpful. Essentially, they are being asked to reason about incorrect input which they do not perceive as having been incorrect. Before higher level strategies can be useful, more basic and elementary strategies have to be employed!

Teaching More About the Non-Content Words

One strategy flows easily from the focus on non-content words. Their high frequency alone would justify their being emphasized in any reading program. But their power is not restricted simply to their high rate of use. Non-content words play a vital role in the syntax of the language (Sapir, 1921). For example, a single non-content word is responsible for the different meanings of HE WALKED TO THE DOG and HE WALKED THE DOG. These tiny, easily overlooked words dramatically determine the meaning of sentences. Non-content words may not have clear referents; **that in no way implies that they are without meaning.**

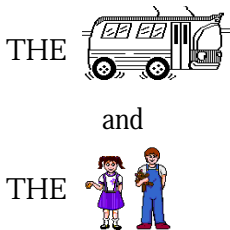
Understanding the power and role of these words is vital in helping the students overcome their syntax difficulties. *The Sentence Master* achieves this by structuring the teaching of the non-content words to focus not only on the letters through which they are transmitted, but also on the grammatical properties they possess.

For example, the first non-content word in the program is the word THE. In terms of its grammatical properties, THE is key to noun phrases such as *the boy* and *the house*. Further, in English, the word THE can accompany any noun regardless of whether it is singular, plural, masculine, feminine or neuter. This property is what allows us to say *the ball, the balls, the animals, the plant*, and so on. (Those who are familiar with foreign languages such as French, Russian, Spanish, or German will recognize that quite different rules apply in different languages.)

The central characteristics of the non-content words are conveyed to the student through careful structuring of the material. As you will see when you look at the computer screen, the user does not have to face complicated verbal interpretations. Such interpretations often serve primarily

as painful obstacle courses to individuals whose language abilities are problematic. Instead, in *The Sentence Master*, the material is organized to permit the user to glean the information through clear and repeated examples.

For example, imagine a student who is right at the beginning of the reading process. He or she as yet knows no written word and the first non-content word being taught is the word THE. By pairing that word with a picture of an object, this non-reading individual can still be led to “read” a phrase. This rubric-type procedure yields phrases such as:



Naturally, this technique can also be used with written words that the student has learned to decode. Thus, the first content word taught in the program is the word BUS. This can easily be combined with the word THE to form the phrase: THE BUS. Similar pairings can be shown incorporating any other nouns the program user has learned.

Integrating the Material

Once a word is learned, it is kept in the program and used repeatedly as a building block to other non-content words. For instance, the second non-content word taught is the word IS. This can now be combined with THE to form sentences such as:



The next word taught is HERE and this can now be combined with the previous words to have the student deal with sentences such as:

THE BUS IS HERE.
and
HERE IS THE BUS.

The repeated use of the same words in increasingly complex material serves two key purposes. (1) It meets the students’ need for the multiple trials necessary for over-learning. (2) It helps them integrate new material into their already established repertoire.

The repetition and interweaving is also of enormous benefit to the teacher. Teachers commonly face the need

to review ‘old’ material in order to see whether it has been retained. By interweaving the old and the new in a steady and regular manner, there is no need to review past material. Re-use of the material ensures retention.

COMPREHENSION

The Problem

The non-content words have effects that go beyond the meaning of the sentences in which they appear. They also affect the meaning of the sentences that follow.

For example, consider two simple sentences containing identical content words. The words are BOY, SEE, and DOG and the sentences are:

1. THE BOY CANNOT SEE HIS DOG.
and
2. THE BOY CAN SEE A DOG.

The content words in the two sentences are the same. Nevertheless, the meanings of the sentences are very different. The differences are the direct result of the non-content words surrounding and modifying the content words.

Now let’s move on to consider a sentence that might follow the examples just offered. Given the way in which text develops, the succeeding sentence would be likely to contain referents to both the BOY and the DOG. A possible sentence therefore might be: HE WANTS TO FIND THEM. For ease of discussion, we will refer to this new sentence as sentence 3.

If sentences 1 and 3 are combined, we get the quite reasonable pairing of:

1. THE BOY CANNOT SEE HIS DOG.
3. HE WANTS TO FIND HIM.

On the other hand, if sentences 2 and 3 are combined, we get the unreasonable pairing:

2. THE BOY CAN SEE A DOG.
3. HE WANTS TO FIND HIM.

These examples illustrate the critical role that non-content words play in the links between sentences. Identical content words can convey a meaningful, or meaningless message — depending upon the non-content words that accompany them. This aspect of language represents another area of significance for those with reading problems.

Having minimized their attention to the non-content words, unskilled readers often have little sense as to how the sentences will unfold. For example, any student who

concentrated on the words BOY SEE and DOG in the illustration above will find the 1-3 sentence pairing to be as probable, or as improbable, as the 2-3 pairing. This is precisely the situation in which many poor readers repeatedly find themselves. Essentially, teaching programs which neglect the non-content words result in unskilled readers being locked into reading without true meaning.

The Treatment

The stories in *The Sentence Master* program are specifically designed to help poor readers overcome their difficulties in understanding the links across sentences. The stories are first presented on the computer. Each is designed to provide the experience of seeing and hearing well-organized text that conveys a story, even at the earliest stages of reading. Once a story has been read on the computer, students are given a printed version of the story. *The Sentence Master* includes reproducible Story Booklets so that students may begin to build a library of their very own.

The Sentence Types: Simple Yet Complex

Level I contains 8 stories. All of them are confined to three sentence types. These are:

HERE IS AN X.
THE X CAN Y.
THE X IS YING.

These sentence patterns might seem to be inordinately simple. Paradoxically, this is just the response we would like the users to have. We want them to have the sense of being totally in command of the material. This is an experience that is unfortunately all too rare in those with reading problems.

At the same time, within the framework of simplicity, we can still expose the students to some of the complexities of our language system. For instance, consider the variety of permutations and combinations possible with just the three sentence types listed above. The basic structure HERE IS A can appear in an array of guises including, but not limited to the following:

HERE IS A _____.
THERE IS A _____.
HERE ARE _____S.
THERE ARE _____S.

Each of the other types can appear with a similar range of variation. And each of the variations can be paired with the others to form an enormous range of possibilities. Thus, the text might read:

HERE IS A GIRL.
SHE CAN RUN.
SHE IS RUNNING.

On the other hand, another reasonable combination might be:

HERE ARE SOME GIRLS.
THEY ARE RUNNING.

As before, people who are sophisticated in language might find the endless permutations to be unnecessary. The material appears simply to be 'stating the obvious.' For those with language problems, however, the perspective is quite different. For them, the slow, systematic changes in the material are a relief. They are the means for becoming aware of language principles that more competent individuals are able to 'pick up' without conscious effort.

Each of the four levels of *The Sentence Master* presents the student with increasingly complex sentence patterns. The sentence patterns have been selected so as to represent ideas that are central to understanding any coherent text. As in the teaching of the words, every pattern taught is retained at the higher levels along with the new forms.

Listed below are some of the major patterns contained within each of the levels.

In Level 1, the student sees patterns that:

- identify relevant people and objects. This is conveyed through the sentence patterns THIS IS AN X and HERE IS AN X.
- offer information that extends or elaborates on the people and objects that have been identified. This is conveyed in the sentence patterns THE X CAN Y and THE X IS YING.

In Level 2, the student sees patterns that:

- present ideas about the non-present. These are conveyed through sentence patterns containing the past (as in THE X WAS YING) and the negative (as in THIS IS NOT AN X and THE Xs ARE NOT YING).
- express differences between intention and action. These are conveyed through sentence patterns containing the concept of BUT (as in X WANTS TO Y, BUT X CANNOT Y).
- present ways for seeking information. These are conveyed through sentence patterns containing question forms (as in IS THE X YING?).

- present ways for responding to requests for information. These are conveyed through sentence patterns that represent answers to questions (as in YES, THAT IS AN X and NO, THE X WAS NOT YING).

In Level 3, the student sees patterns that:

- involve attributes and qualities of people and objects. These are conveyed through sentence patterns containing adjectives (as in THE X is ___ and THE ___ X is YING).
- refer to concepts of time and place. These are conveyed through sentence patterns containing prepositional phrases (as in ON THE ___, TO THE ___, IN THE ___) and adverbs involving recurrence (AGAIN, ANYMORE, TOO).

In Level 4, the student sees patterns that:

- involve more complex forms of information seeking. These are conveyed through the sentence patterns containing WH questions (as in WHAT, WHO, WHOSE, HOW).
- involve generalization and classification. These are conveyed through sentence patterns that elaborate on generic characteristics of both animate and inanimate groups (as in Xs HAVE A, B, and C and Xs CAN A, BUT NOT B).
- extend the awareness of the non-present. These are conveyed through sentence patterns containing references to the future (as in WILL and GOING TO) and to the conditional (as in WOULD and COULD).

The sentence patterns are presented in books, with each level containing 8 books. The increase in complexity from Level 1 to Level 4 is slow, but nevertheless, dramatic. Thus, at Level 1, the student will have been limited to texts like the following:

SOME MONSTERS CAN JOG.
THIS MONSTER CAN JOG.
HE IS JOGGING.

By Level 4, however, the student can read and understand segments like the following:

EACH OF THE FROGS IS JUST LIKE THE BIRDS. EACH ONE IS THINKING, "THERE IS NO WAY THAT WE WANT THIS THING AS A FRIEND. BUT THE FROGS DON'T SAY THAT. THEY JUST SAY, "YOU DO NOT JUMP AS WELL AS WE DO SO YOU CANNOT BE OUR FRIEND."

In essence, *The Sentence Master* brings to the fore language principles that have been hidden from those with reading disabilities. In so doing, it provides them with the opportunity to attain a secure foundation for reading comprehension.

By the completion of Level 4, the student will have become comfortable in dealing with the range of linguistic complexity that he or she will find in the world of interesting and exciting books.

PHONICS

The Problem

Anyone who has been involved in the area of reading knows the importance of phonics and phonological analysis in reading problems. It is vital for a reader to establish clear relationships between letters and the sounds they represent. The research of the past few decades has only reinforced the power this long-recognized skill holds in effective reading (Jorm & Share, 1983; Liberman, 1973; Stanovich, 1985). (Interestingly, in English, phonic skills lend themselves primarily to the domain of content words. The lack of applicability of these rules to the non-content domain is largely responsible for the teaching of these words as sight words.)

The Treatment

Because issues in phonics and phonology are so fundamental and so well-studied, a wide variety of programs has been developed in this area. Further, the general acceptance of phonic-based approaches means that most students are being offered this material, in one form or another. Because of this, and because of the fact that so many different approaches are used, we have chosen not to address the phonics issue directly in the design of *The Sentence Master*. Were we to have implemented one particular approach, it would have meant that many individuals would have been forced to cope with a system differing from the one to which they had become accustomed.

At the same time, *The Sentence Master* does require the learner to deal with content words. Each of the four levels of *The Sentence Master* presents content words that allow the development of meaningful stories. The four levels, in combination, teach about 150 of the most frequently used content words. In all cases, the content words are relatively common words that readers should know and use. They have been selected to encompass important nouns (such as MAN, CAR, LEGS, FRIEND, TIME), verbs (such as GO, SEE, PUT, MAKE, FIND) and adjectives (such as SAD, HAPPY, LITTLE, LONG, OLD). Many of them will be

familiar to students from training they have already had. Even when this is not the case, they can use their decoding skills to ‘figure them out.’

Nevertheless, we do want to ensure that the students unwaveringly recognize the words they will encounter. Consequently, each of the content words is taught through a range of analytic procedures similar to those used with the non-content words. These procedures are particularly important for selected groups of individuals who present special problems. This is the case, for example, for many deaf students and some language disabled students who fail to master a phonics approach.

WHEN CAN THE PROGRAM BE STARTED?

The Non-Reader

Level 1 of *The Sentence Master* has been specifically designed to be used even with students who cannot read a single word. Nevertheless, all students need to possess a small core of prerequisite skills before they can start on the program.

You’ll readily see the skills that are needed when you think of the basic demands entailed in word recognition. Specifically, a student must have the ability to retain, on a consistent basis, four to five visual elements. This skill allows one to recognize and recall a large number of words. On the other hand, if a student does not yet have this skill, recall of even the simplest of words will not be possible.

Visual recognition of a series of sequential letters is the key skill that an individual must have in order to benefit from the program.

If a student is already able to read and write some words, then it’s almost certain that he or she has a sufficient base in the skills just outlined. Consequently, you can start the program.

On the other hand, if a student has not yet attained any discernible reading skill, then you’ll need to do a brief assessment. In this, you’ll show the student a word such as STOP and state the word that it represents (e.g., “this says *stop*.”). Further, tell the student to look at the word for as long as he or she wishes to do so. Then, when the student is ready, you take the word away and ask him or her to write it from memory. (At no time does the student have to label the letters; he or she only has to reproduce them.)

If the student cannot write, you can carry out the task by showing him or her a sequence of letters containing the letters of the word STOP along with two additional letters. In other words, the student might see S M T O E P. The letters of the word in question always have to be presented in a left-right sequence (so that T, for example, would not

appear to the left of the S). You can then indicate to the student that he or she has to select the letters that make the word ‘stop’.

If the student can complete this task using three or four different words, then he or she almost certainly has the skills to begin *The Sentence Master* program. At the same time, do not be too hasty about concluding that a student who has difficulty with this task will not benefit from the program.

Many students are unaccustomed to this sort of task so they might fail solely because of lack of familiarity. To see if this factor is operating, it’s important to carry out at least 8 to 10 trials. In that way, you’ll be able to see if the student can complete the task correctly once he or she understands what is required.

During these trials, you can offer the feedback that the student needs for a correct response. For example, the student might have written, or placed, the letters out of order. In this situation, you can say, “No, the letters have to go in this order” and then you can ask the student to complete the task again.

If a student demonstrates a continuing inability to carry out the task even with this level of support, then it’s likely that he or she is not ready to begin on *The Sentence Master* at that point. Work could and should be done, however, to build up the student’s memory for visual elements — since this skill is critical to reading, no matter what method of reading instruction is used (see Blank, McKirdy, & Payne, 1991).

The Beginning Reader

You’re also likely to encounter students who have some beginning reading skills. Then the decision that you have to make moves from whether or not to start the program, to deciding the level at which you should begin the work. As long as the student possesses the necessary skills, it is perfectly feasible to start the program at Levels 2, 3, or 4. Guidelines to help you make the appropriate determination are presented at the conclusion of this discussion.

WHEN SPOKEN ENGLISH IS A PROBLEM

The analysis of language underlying *The Sentence Master* can be useful for groups other than students with language disabilities. For example, the program is well-suited to individuals who have problems with English, not because of a disability, but rather because it is their second language. This includes (1) hearing impaired individuals whose primary language may be a signing system and (2) individuals for whom English is a Second Language (ESL).

'Cracking the code' of a foreign language can often be difficult and frustrating. The task is greatly eased, however, when the essential structures of the language are revealed to the learner. The carefully controlled patterns available in *The Sentence Master* provide just this sort of experience.

A CONCLUDING NOTE

The discussion here has concentrated on the philosophy and the design features of the program. At the same time, we recognize that no program, regardless of its educational value, is going to reach — and teach — if it fails to be appealing. We believe we have achieved this vital goal. When students look at *The Sentence Master*, they immediately identify it as a reading program — except that they see it as one filled with enjoyment, success, and entertainment.

For a start, the characters are delightful. Who can resist 'blobs' and 'monsters' that have only the best of intentions? Further, the materials are paced so as to ensure a high degree of success. Reading is no longer a guessing game filled with failure, but a secure achievement. And if anyone has any doubts about that, there are skeletons and snakes to offer ample appreciation for correct answers.

These motivational features are essential for reaching students who, until now, have found reading to be a mire of confusion and failure. We hope, and believe, that the combination of well-structured and highly motivating materials will similarly enable your students to realize their dreams of becoming competent readers.

Brief Assessment: Finding Out Where to Start

Beginning readers vary greatly in their skills. To maximize learning and motivation, it's important to have children learn what they need to learn, while at the same time, not having them spend time repeating material they've already mastered.

The Sentence Master is designed to meet children's varied abilities through **a series of four levels** that systematically increase in difficulty. You begin with the level that best suits the child's abilities.

The following brief assessment helps you determine which of the four levels of *The Sentence Master* is the right starting point for your student. In this assessment, you dictate a few sentences and the student writes each one in turn. Of course, if the student has no reading or writing mastery at all, bypass the assessment and begin *The Sentence Master* with Level 1.

The procedure is as follows:

1. Start with the sentences listed below under Sentences for Level 1.
2. Provide the child with lined paper and a pencil or thin marker, and say, "I want you to do some writing for me." (In case your child cannot handwrite, allow him or her to use the computer for writing.)
3. Read a complete sentence aloud (e.g., "**There are some robots.**"). Follow this by offering a word at a time (e.g., "Now write the word **there**"). Give the student whatever time he or she needs in order to write the word.
4. Proceed through each word until the sentence is completed.
5. Repeat this procedure to complete all the sentences for Level 1.
6. During the assessment, do not offer the student any help. If the student requests help, say, "You have to do this on your own. Later on, I'll help you, but not now."
7. After the sentences for Level 1 have been completed, score the student's performance. For the scoring, a word is counted as either correct (if it is written correctly) or incorrect (if it has one or more errors in it). For example, a word like robots may have various misspellings (e.g., robts, robuts, robst- any of these would be counted as one error). Repeated errors on a particular word are only counted once in the group of sentences for a level. For example, if the student misspells the word "**are**" three times in the sentences for Level 1, it is still only counted as one error. Do not score punctuation.

8. At the end of the sentences for each level, you will see the scoring criteria for the sentences.

If the student's performance on the sentences for Level 1 does not meet the set criterion, then *The Sentence Master: Level 1* is the appropriate level at which to start the work.

On the other hand, if the student's performance is above the set criterion, you move on to the sentences for Level 2. Continue in this manner until you find the level that is the right one for the student.

The sentences the child will write:

Sentences for Level 1

There are some robots. They are jogging.
These men are helping the king. They like to help.
That is a kid. She is swimming here.

Criterion

0-4 errors; continue on to the Sentences for Level 2.
5 or more errors, stop the assessment; start the student on Level 1 of *The Sentence Master*

Sentences for Level 2

The man wanted to clean his car but he did not have a rag.
The puppy was trying to rest.
This duck does not have to fly.

Criterion

0-4 errors; continue on to the Sentences for Level 3.
5 or more errors (and fewer than 5 errors on Level 1), stop the assessment; start the student on Level 2 of *The Sentence Master*.

Sentences for Level 3

Your friend says he can bring some pencils.
Did everyone still need to fly on the plane?
Can the barber cut the kid's long hair?

Criterion

0-4 errors; continue on to the Sentences for Level 4.
5 or more errors (and fewer than 5 errors on each of Levels 1 and 2), stop the assessment; start the student on Level 3 of *The Sentence Master*.

Sentences for Level 4

Why didn't the bird just stay where it was?
Once the animal was alone, they never got to see it.
When could you open that?

Criterion

0-4 errors; the student is probably beyond *The Sentence Master* program.

5 or more errors (and fewer than 5 errors on each of Levels 1, 2 and 3), stop the assessment; start the student on Level 4 of *The Sentence Master*.

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