Laying the Foundation: Developing a Sight Words Course for Chinese Young Learners

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VIPKid is an EdTech startup that partners Chinese young learners (YLs) with North American English teachers. The company has had more than 100,000 teachers who have used the platform to teach upwards of one million learners (VIPKid, 2021a). Formally, VIPKid is an English tutoring company, as English has been "a compulsory subject" in Chinese schools since 2003 (Qi, 2016). Chinese YLs and their parents are increasingly interested in building targeted reading skills as these learners progress through different English language levels and programs, and programs that are designed based on United States educational standards are popular because of their established and demonstrated credibility.

The Influence of Orthography on Reading

Further amplifying an interest in reading programs, the Chinese language has a logographic orthography system, which means "characters as a basic writing unit possess a number of strokes that are packed into a square shape" (Tan et al., 2001, p. 836). English follows a deep, alphabetic orthography, which means that letters represent phonemes that can be strung together to make words; individual letters themselves do not have assigned meaning like individual Chinese characters or morphemes. This means that "regular or quasi-regular grapheme-phoneme conversions that exist in all alphabetic languages (e.g., the letter b is pronounced /b/) are impossible in Chinese" (Plaut et al., 1996; Tan & Perfetti, 1998 as cited in Tan et al., 2001, p. 836). Learner familiarity with Chinese orthography, then, suggests that a sight words course is a product worth developing because it focuses on a targeted English reading skill of memorizing whole words—instead of breaking words down or building them up with through phonics—that that may be easier for Chinese learners to grasp.

The Role of the VIPKid Research Institute

With such a large learner pool, and with the vast majority of English learning YLs (including VIPKid learners) at lower levels according to the Common European Framework of Reference, (CEFR; Council of Europe, 2021) and Pearson's Global Scale of English (GSE; Pearson, n.d.), it is prudent to make a course that can appeal to the largest student base and solve the problem of not having enough reading options. The VIPKid Research Institute (VRI; VIPKid, 2021b) plans to develop and release five levels of a sight words course, to be available to learners looking for supplemental English opportunities or for learners who need some degree of reading intervention or remediation, with a concordance laid out in Table 1.

Table 1

Entry Level Concordance for VIPKid Learners

Sight Words Level	Grade in Chinese School	CEFR/Pearson GSE Level	Student Age
1	Grades 1-2	Pre-A1	4-6 years
2	Grades 2-4	Pre-A1/A1	5-7 years
3	Grades 3-4	A1	6-8 years
4	Grades 3+	A2	7-9 years
5	Grades 3+	A2/A2+	8-10 years

Over five levels, this course will cover the first 250 sight words—from pre-kindergarten through third grade—based on the popular Dolch sight words lists (Sight Words, 2021). The first two levels of this course (~100 words) will launch at the end of the first quarter of 2021, with the final three levels set to launch by the end of the second quarter of 2021. Learners who do not perform well on their unit assessments in Major Course (MC; the primary product line for VIPKid learners) will have a sight words level recommended to them.

Each level of the sight words course includes eight lessons, divided over two units: lessons one through three and five through seven of each unit will consist of synchronous, one-to-one lessons lasting 25 minutes. Lessons four and eight will be synchronous, one-to-four review lessons with an AI teacher. Each lesson will focus on five to ten sight words used in a variety of grammatical structures, supported by images representing assumed content knowledge based on alignment with the existing MC product in which most VIPKid learners are already enrolled; bolded words are non- sight words, and the target structures for lessons two through eight may account for recycled sight words (i.e., introduced before, according to MC levels and units in Table 1, and practiced again), as outlined in Table 2. Each of the one-to-one lessons will have a lesson theme, and each unit will have a theme (lesson themes contribute to an overall unit theme). This helps string words together with meaningful context. Learners will have pre- and post-class materials as well, including online quizzes, listening and speaking practice, tracing worksheets, and dedicated sight words readers.

Table 2

Basic Scope and Sequence for Sight Words Level 1

Level	Unit	Unit Theme	Lesson	Lesson Theme	Sight Words (41)	Target Structures (examples)
1	1		1	Colorful Animals	a, and, blue, is, red, this, yellow	This is a red, yellow, and blue **bird**.
1	1		2	Time to Play	I, can, down, jump, play, the, up, we	I/We can play. The **dog** can jump up and down.
1	1	At the Park	3	Hide and Seek	find, help, here, it, look, me, see, where	Where is the **ball**? Help me look and find it. Here it is! See it?
1	1		4	N/A	review of sight words practiced in lessons 1-3	combined structures based on sight words practiced in lessons 1-3
Level 1 Unit 1 Objectives—Students Will Be Able To (SWBAT) 1. identify clusters of sight words in isolation and in phrases (23 sight words in unit 1); 2. recognize recycled sight words over subsequent lessons through interactive activities;						

3. build sentences using sight words and scaffolded content knowledge; and
4. read or follow-along with unit chants and readers.

Aligned to CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RF.K.3.C: Read common high-frequency words by sight (CCSS Initiative, 2021)

1	2		5	In my Room	in, my, one, three, two	Look in my **bag**. I can see one/two/three **pencil(s).**
1	2	Rainy Day Play	6	Time to Dress Up	big, funny, go, little, not, to, you	Look! See my big/little **hat**? Where are my **shoes**? Run and find my **shoes**. This is not funny!
1	2		7	Story Time	away, come, for, make, run, said	"…" I/we/you/said. Come here!/Go away! Where can I look for it? I can make a **doll**!
1	2		8	N/A	review of sight words practiced in lessons 5-7	combined structures based on sight words practiced in lessons 5-7

Level 1 Unit 2 Objectives—Students Will Be Able To (SWBAT)
1. recognize clusters of sight words in isolation and in phrases (41 total sight words across units 1-2);
2. recognize recycled sight words over subsequent lessons through interactive activities;
3. build sentences using sight words and scaffolded content knowledge; and
4. read or follow-along with level chants and readers.

Aligned to CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RF.K.3.C: Read common high-frequency words by sight (CCSS Initiative, 2021)

Program Responsibilities and Components

The VRI has drafted lesson level materials, including engaging lesson slides, songs and chants created specifically to correspond with sight words and readers, and readers using original art and content. A more detailed outline of content components are included in Table 4. With the exception of art requests, AI lessons (two per unit), and materials compiled for Chinese marketing efforts, all preliminary materials will be created internally by a team of four people in the United States VRI office: the VRI director, a senior manager, a specialist, and a curriculum developer.

Each contributor has different levels of responsibility and time allotment per week. The senior manager acts as the project lead, creating the scope and sequence, lesson and unit chants, and readers; the senior manager also oversees all deliverables and timelines. The specialist creates pre- and post-class materials, along with the content sequences for lessons, under advisement from the senior manager. The curriculum developer is responsible for putting determined sequences into pre-made templates, consulting on different interaction types, and liaising with contributors in Beijing. The unit chants and readers reflect larger language goals (unit and level) that shape how progressive language should be across lessons; they also require significant art requests, which means further interaction with appropriate teams in Beijing. As needed, people will contribute across and beyond their responsibilities to make sure all internal and external deadlines are met.

Table 4

Lesson components, Sight Words Level 1, Unit 1

	Lesson 1	**Lesson 2**	**Lesson 3**	**Lesson 4**
pre-class	Chatterbox (CB): listen, repeat, record, play back on our assessment platform 5-8 words/5-8 target sentences			
In-class	PPT on our lesson platform (~20-30 interactive slides) one-to-one, synchronous (content drafted offline, then transferred to platform)			AI one-to-four, synchronous
	Song or Chant #1	Song or Chant #2	Song or Chant #3	N/A at Beijing's discretion (we will provide lesson plan)
	TPR gifs of sight words spelled out (e.g., tall, small, fall letters, as in "boy")			

post-class	Post-class "quiz:" five multiple choice questions on our assessment platform; learners are encouraged to take these quizzes until they see scores improve. The post-class quiz scores are available to teachers, who use the score to determine how to extend or scaffold in the next lesson.		
	As this course is an intervention for learners struggling with the Major Course (MC) product line, there is no formal assessment; this assessment will be reflected in the unit assessments given according to the MC course map.		
	Study Guide PDF: flashcards of sight words, sight words tracing practice, cut and glue sight words tactile project. Students download after each lesson.		
	Reader PDF: cover and page 1	Reader PDF: pages 2-3	Reader PDF: pages 4-5	Reader PDF: coloring worksheet (of cover image)

Theoretical Connections

Principled Eclecticism and a Pluralistic Approach

Mayer explains that "the promise of multimedia learning is that teachers can tap the power of visual and verbal forms of expression in the service of promoting student understanding" (Mayer, 2003, p. 127). The variation that Mayer describes is echoed by Bednar et al. (1992), who maintain the importance of a foundation based on "the widest array of research and theory" (p. 17). In English Language Teaching (ELT), this is referred to as "principled eclecticism" (Mellow, 2002). Principled eclecticism suggests a pluralistic approach to language teaching, using different approaches as necessary.

The sight words course is a remediation course for young learners who struggle with reading in English. The nature of sight words is that they are often abstract and require learners to identify them quickly and move on while they read, contributing to reading fluency. This means that there are elements of an audiolingual approach to input of the content in the lesson (audiolingualism refers to rote memorization and quite a bit of oral drills). Audiolingualism is

considered pretty archaic if it is used as a standalone approach; a single way of presenting new language or teaching a full lesson is ineffective (especially for early and young learners). With a pluralistic approach using principled eclecticism, however, it is appropriate to have sections of the lesson that focus on presenting content that should be memorized. The VRI has chosen to make the words very visual by showing whole words and letters as images composed of tall, small, and fall letters to aid in memorization.

Motivation Considerations

Acknowledging diverse approaches—coupled with an acknowledgement of diverse learners—highlights the challenges that come with instructional design, when different stakeholders in course development have different views on how to promote motivation. When developing educational materials for early and young learners, there is the propensity to "equate motivation with entertainment and fun" or "truly motivated [learners] will be smiling and having fun" (Keller & Litchfield, 2002, pp. 86-87). However, there is a difference between being entertained and "captur[ing] [student] interest" (p. 92). The sight words course tries to capitalize on diverse needs and motivations of learners, and this is reflected in the suite of value-add components offered in the program (e.g., songs and chants, readers); these components have not only a solid pedagogical foundation, but they also are appealing to potential (students and parents as) customers.

Design Principles

On the face of it, the sight words course material is eye-catching and young learner-friendly, especially given the effort to make sight words more appealing, as discussed throughout, but a deeper dive into the content and course structure reveals the intentional design decisions, made both in terms of the content itself and in terms of how the content is delivered

and received (by teacher and by learner). Mayer (2017) describes the "Emotional Design Principle" or the principle that "[p]eople learn better when onscreen characters display appealing colors, shapes, and human-like facial expressions." To that end, the characters VIPKid uses are a mix of children and friendly creatures; the VIPKid mascot is a small, lovable dinosaur (appropriately named "Dino") who regularly interacts with child characters Mike and Meg. This is no different in the sight words course, but in the course, these characters interact with sight words or in scenarios related to the given sight words context.

Mayer's explanation also seems to suggest that the Emotional Design Principle might contradict the Coherence Principle, which explains that "[p]eople learn better when extraneous words, pictures, and sounds are excluded rather than included" (2009, p. 267). This is a balance the VRI tries to maintain in the development of the sight words course, especially since the learners are as young as three and because the most graphic elements that should be highlighted are the words themselves. This also follows the logic that Mayer (2003) explains when he shares the "multimedia effect," or "that students learn more deeply from a multimedia explanation presented in words and pictures than in words alone" (p. 131). While this is tricky, because sight words in isolation don't necessarily have some visual representation, it means that when sight words are combined in phrases and sentences, they need to be supplemented by images on screen, and this tie-in needs to be considered from the beginning of the design process.

Promoting Language Recall

Finally, Mayer further identifies an important distinction between "remembering and understanding" (2009, p. 19). Again, this is especially relevant for a sight words context, because there is a tangible goal in mind of students being able to identify 250 sight words over the course of an entire program (five levels). If learners do not have opportunities to use the language

beyond a 25-minute lesson, there is little chance they will retain the information, and the point of a remediation sight words course will be moot. In addition to a defined number of sight words per lesson, recycled language must intentionally be accounted for. For example, in lesson 2, the lesson 2 sight words are introduced, while lesson 1 sight words are recycled in, as appropriate. For lesson 3, sight words from lessons 1-2 are recycled and folded in alongside new lesson 3 sight words. This will make it easier to draft readers moving forward (more sight words allow for more engaging reader scenarios), but it also means some of the lesser recycled sight words need to be accounted for, in pre- and post-class materials.

Next Steps

The VRI has started drafting and internally reviewing lesson plans. There is a basic input and practice sequence used across lessons 1-3, all building toward a lesson theme that contributes to an overall unit theme, outlined in Table 2. The general Lesson 1 sequence builds from learning sight words in isolation to building and reading phrases and sentences. Lesson 2-3 follow the same format, but these lessons include chants as warm-ups that recycle language; recycled sight words are folded in with new content across the lesson. See Table 5.

Table 5

Sample Lesson 1 Flow: Interactive PPTs

Setting the Unit and Lesson Context

1.   Learning objectives
    2.   Introduction (context setting: Unit chant)
    3.   Learning Path Slide (Let's learn, Let's sing, Let's talk, Let's go)
 	
"Let's learn!"=language input and practice
"Let's sing!"=language practice, review, & engagement
"Let's talk!"=language extension and building
"Let's go!"=wrap-up/preview enrichment

Input: 3 sight words (blue, red, yellow)
4.   Kinesthetic, explicit input of new sight words (using letter arms/fingers that mimic "tall," "small," and "fall" letters); identify the word and the letters within the word

Setting Additional Context for 3 Words
5. Context setting interactive drag and drop
Guided Practice: 3 sight words (blue, red, yellow)
6. 3 "Let's learn!" mini-sequences (Slide 1: input; Slide 2: drag and drop letters)
Independent Practice: 3 sight words (blue, red, yellow)
7. Drag and drop: word focus (with previous 3 sight words: blue, red, yellow)   8. Drag and drop: phrase focus (with previous 3 sight words: blue, red, yellow)
Input: 3 sight words (a, and, is, this)   9. Kinesthetic, explicit input of new sight words (using letter arms/fingers that mimic "tall," "small," and "fall" letters); identify the word and the letters within the word
Setting Additional Context for 4 Words
10. Introduction (context setting interactive drag and drop)
Guided Practice: 4 sight words (a, and, is, this)
11. 4 "Let's learn!" mini-sequences (Slide 1: input; Slide 2: drag and drop letters)
Independent Practice: 4 sight words (a, and, is, this)
12. Drag and drop: word focus (with previous four sight words: a, and, is this)   13. Drag and drop: phrase focus (with all sight words combined: a, and, blue, is, red, this, yellow)
Relax and Review
14. "Let's sing!" practice with lesson song
Sentence Work
15. "Let's talk!" sentence building
Reflection and Wrap-Up
16. "Let's go!" drag and drop recall of learned sight words
Enrichment preview
17. Preview the reader

While internal timelines have shifted slightly based on unavoidable issues (e.g., gaining access to servers with materials in China, missing headcount during Chinese New Year), MVP timelines for Level 1, Unit 1, Lessons 1-4 are reflected below in Table 6, as are other deliverables necessary to meet the March deadline.

Table 6

MVP and Launch Timeline for Sight Words Level 1, Unit 1

Date	Deliverable
February 1, 2021	Art request for Level 1, Unit 1 submitted to Beijing point of contact *Allow two weeks for art to be developed.* **COMPLETED 2/1**
February 5, 2021	Lesson plan for AI review lesson (lesson 4) submitted to Beijing *The Beijing team will develop their own activities and interactions with guidance and support from the VRI; Beijing team needs ample time to film and produce AI lessons.* **COMPLETED 2/1**
February 9, 2021	Lessons 1-3 ready for internal review **COMPLETED 2/9**
February 12, 2021 February 16, 2021	All pre- and post-class materials ready for Quality Assurance (QA) team *Allow two weeks for QA feedback.* **TIMELINE REVISED FOR CHINESE NEW YEAR HOLIDAY**
February 15, 2021 February 18, 2021	All Level 1, Unit 1 lessons (including AI) ready for QA team *Allow two weeks for QA feedback.* **TIMELINE REVISED FOR CHINESE NEW YEAR HOLIDAY**
s	Pre-MVP begins (gathering students and teachers; establishing observation tasks)
March 5, 2021	Level 1, Unit 1, Lessons 1-4 ready for MVP
March 5, 2021	Art request for all of Level 2 (units 1-2)
March 10, 2021	Level 1, Unit 2 to QA
March 24, 2021	Level 2, Units 1-2 due to QA
March 31, 2021	Levels 1-2, all lessons ready to go live
March 2021 (Ongoing)	MVP viewing and lesson revision Lesson drafting for Levels 1, Unit 2 and Level 2, Units 1 and 2 *Note: The MVP will be conducted for Level 1, Unit 1, but all of Sight Words Levels 1 and 2 will launch March 31, end of Q1.*

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