*THE EFFECTS OF KNOWN-ITEM INTERSPERSAL
ON ACQUISITION AND RETENTION
OF SPELLING AND SIGHTREADING WORDS¹*

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The use of well-documented procedures such as shaping, differential reinforcement, and fading may not be the most practical for teaching certain academic behaviors. An alternative procedure of interspersing trials on previously trained items with trials on unknown items has been suggested, but its effects on acquisition and retention have not been systematically examined. This study investigated the effects of interspersing known items during training on new tasks. Six mentally retarded adolescents were given pretests on spelling and sightreading words, which were divided into pools of learned and unlearned items. Training and baseline conditions were implemented concurrently, using a multi-element design. During interspersal training sessions, 10 known words from the pretest were alternately presented with each of 10 test words that were incorrect on the pretest. The ratio of previously mastered words to test words was gradually reduced. During baseline sessions, 10 different test words were presented without alternation of previously known words. During this condition, a procedure involving high-density social reinforcement contingent on task-related behaviors, but not necessarily correct responses, was later introduced, followed by a return to the original noninterspersal baseline. During all conditions, test words were deleted and replaced after meeting a mastery criterion of three consecutive correct trials. Retention tests were administered over learned test words for all conditions, at specified intervals. Results showed that both acquisition and retention of spelling and sightreading words were facilitated by the interspersal procedure. All subjects acquired more words during the interspersal condition than either the high-density or baseline conditions. The effectiveness of the procedure may possibly be attributed to better maintenance of attending behavior to unknown items as a function of the inclusion of known items, which directly increase the amount of reinforcement for correct responses during the early stages of skill acquisition.

DESCRIPTORS: academic behavior, teacher attention, approval, multi-element design, fading, noncontingent reinforcement, high-density reinforcement, sight words, spelling, retardates.

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