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*The Lonely Robin: A Children's Book to Target Liquid Speech Sounds*

Kelsey Meints

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Author Note: This reflective essay was prepared for HNR 499 Honors Senior Project, supervised by Dr. Courtney Karasinski, Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders.

*The Lonely Robin: A Children's Book to Target Liquid Speech Sounds***Background/Purpose**

The purpose of the project was to write and illustrate a children's book for readers aged 8-10 years old. The plot was meant to engage children so that they can relate to the characters, and learn about significant real-life themes. Words were selected very carefully for the story. The book primarily focuses on words with the /l/ (e.g. *lake*) and /r/ (e.g. *red*) English phonemes. An appendix at the end of the book classifies target words according sound and syllable position. The author's goal is that this book can be used as a tool for joint reading and independent practice in conjunction with speech-language therapy.

**Production of Liquid Speech Sounds**

The /l/ and /r/ English phonemes are part of a manner of sounds called liquids. According to Small (2012), children often have difficulty with the pronunciation of liquids, and will commonly substitute a /w/ or /j/ sound in place of the /l/ or /r/ sound. This substitution process is called gliding. Gliding can occur in children with typical developmental patterns as well as those with phonological disorders. It is common to see this substitution process in children from age 2;0 until age 5;0 or older.

Liquids are one of the last manners of phonemes to develop (Smit, Hand, Freilinger, Bernthal, and Bird, 1990). These phonemes can take up to 8 years of age for correct production to be mastered ("Speech & articulation development chart," 2003). As a result, children may need more practice to fully master these phonemes. Typical methods of practice elicited by a speech-language pathologist (SLP) include activity sheets, flashcards, and board games (Articulation, phonology, & intelligibility, 2014). The organizations that many SLPs purchase materials from have very few children's books designed to help practice phonemic awareness. It

is the author's goal that *The Lonely Robin* can be used as a tool to increase phonemic awareness and practice sounds classified by a specific manner of articulation.

### **Reading Exposure**

Hulit (2006) reported that there many linguistic benefits to exposing children to books early in development: "There is evidence that children whose caregivers actively promote exposure to reading have greater phonological awareness than children who live in homes that are less reader-friendly" (p. 265). Reading is an activity that not only gives children a chance to practice individual sounds, but it also provides experience with decoding, grammar, punctuation, and other vital components of written language. By incorporating target speech sounds into a story book, children can practice articulation in an environment that is natural and relevant to their world.

### **Plot**

One of the most important parts of writing a children's book was to develop a plot. This proved to also be one of the most difficult components in completing the project. For me, the idea for a plot started slowly. I knew that a central theme would be required to encourage flow and to keep the reader interested. An investigation began as to what topics are important to children. According to children's author Aaron Shepard, "Children's stories educate for life by exploring significant themes- as do good adult stories" (Shepard, 2000, p.11).

If you ask 8-year-old children what is important to them, they will probably name people, pets, or an exciting new hobby or sport. A girl might love playing soccer and tell you that it is the most important part of her world. A boy might have a pet dog that he can talk about for hours. Whether it is scoring goals with soccer teammates, or playing in the yard with man's best friend, important aspects of children's involve children forming relationships. According to PBS.org,

spending time with friends is the most important part of a child's the school day ("Your child's social life," 2015). Making friends is one of the most valuable skills a child can acquire as they grow and develop social skills.

What are important qualities to look for in a friend? Personal preference plays a large role in how children form friendships. However, according to the Women's and Children's Health Network of South Australia, successful childhood friendships have key characteristics ("Kids health," 2015). Five of the most important qualities to have in a friendship include the ability to share things, have fun, feel safe, be respected, and spend time together. *The Lonely Robin* teaches children about important characteristics of friendship by incorporating characters who failed to exhibit each of these qualities into the story.

### **Characters**

The five important characteristics of friendship described above provided a basis for each of the characters in *The Lonely Robin*. A list of animals that begin with /r/ or /l/ was brainstormed, and each animal was matched to a characteristic of friendship that the animal would fail to display.

#### **The Lizard**

The lizard in *The Lonely Robin* is very wealthy and has a large collection of gold coins. The robin seeks to begin a friendship by offering to help the lizard with his task of polishing the coins. However, the lizard feels threatened by the presence of the robin, and is afraid that the robin is a thief. The lizard is selfish and will not share his time nor his wealth with the robin.

#### **The Rhino**

The rhino seems like an unlikely candidate for a friend, but that does not stop the robin from approaching him. The robin learns that the rhino likes to eat and sleep all day, which is a

sharp contrast to the activities that the robin enjoys (flying, playing, and singing). The robin quickly discovers that he and the rhino have very little in common.

### **The Lion Cub**

The lion cub appears to be having fun when the robin approaches him. When they try to play together, the lion is very rough. The robin fears that he will become the lion cub's next meal. The robin learns that safety is vital in a good friendship.

### **The Rabbits**

The rabbits are a very talkative group. The robin tries to include himself in their conversation, but after hearing the rabbits talking about him, the robin moves on. The rabbits were cliquy and did not include new friends.

### **The Raccoon**

The raccoon appears to be a good friend. Both the robin and the raccoon like to play. However, the raccoon is nocturnal while the robin is not. The pair cannot maintain a friendship if they cannot spend time together.

### **The Lark**

The lark is an ideal friend for the robin. She enjoys the same activities as the robin, and the two are able to spend time together. The robin feels safe and respected around her. The lark also is happy to share with the robin. The lark encourages diversity in friendships because she is not exactly the same as the robin. She is female and a different species of bird, yet the two animals have important qualities in common to make their friendship successful.

### **The Robin**

The robin models good initiation behaviors by directly approaching each animal in the story. He does not wait for animals to come to him to begin a conversation. The robin suggests

activities like playing, and offers assistance to those who might need it like the lizard. Both of these strategies are good ways to initiate friendships. The robin does not judge other animals based on appearances. The rhino has a very sharp horn, which would be intimidating, but the robin still attempts to befriend the rhino. The robin also models outstanding perseverance in his search for a friend. He does not settle for animals that make him feel uncomfortable, nor does he change his values throughout the story.

### Target Words

One of the most important clinical aspects of *The Lonely Robin* was the words that were used to tell the story. It was vital that the story utilized as many words containing /r/ and /l/ sounds as possible. Word lists were retrieved from various internet sources to assist with initial character development (Lopez-Terrill, 2015; “Targeted word lists,” 2015).

### Analysis

To increase clinical applications of *The Lonely Robin*, all words containing /r/ and /l/ sounds were analyzed. Categories are summarized in the tables below. A complete list of all words containing target sounds can be found in the appendix at the back of *The Lonely Robin*, as well as at the end of this reflection essay (Appendix A-F).

It is important to remember that phonological development examines speech sounds, not letters. A word like “pile” ends with an “e” but the final sound is the /l/ sound.

	/l/	/r/
Initial	late	rich
Medial	valued	sorry
Final	feel	near

**Table 1: Phoneme Location at the Word Level.** Phonemes are present in the initial, medial, or final position within each word. See Appendix A for a complete list of words.

	/l/	/r/
/i/	leaf	replied
/ɪ/	lived	rich
/e/	late	
/ɛ/	let	rest
/æ/	last	rabbit
/ə/ or /ʌ/		rushed
/ʊ/	looks	
/o/	low	
/ɔ/	long	
/ɑ/		rocky
/aɪ/	like	rhino
/ɑr/	lark	

**Table 2: Phoneme Location at the Syllable Level- Prevocalic Position.** Phonemes are present before a vowel in the syllable position. See Appendix B for a complete list of words.

	/l/	/r/
/ɛ/-/o/	hello	
/ə/-/aʊ/		around

**Table 3: Phoneme Location at the Syllable Level- Intervocalic Position.** Phonemes are present between two vowels in the syllable position. See Appendix C for a complete list of words.



	/l/
/i/	steal
/ɪ/	still
/ə/ or /ʌ/	able
/u/	pool
/ɔ/	all
/ɑ/	polish
/aɪ/	pile

**Table 4: Phoneme Location at the Syllable Level- Postvocalic Position.** Phonemes are present after a vowel in the syllable position. See Appendix D for a complete list of words. Note that no /r/ phonemes in the postvocalic position. See Table 5 for diphthongs containing r-colored vowels.

Diphthong	Example
/ɪr/	hear
/ɛr/	share
/ə/	water
/ɜ/	sure
/ɔr/	or
/ɑr/	are

**Table 5: Phoneme Location at the Syllable Level- R-colored Vowels.** Phonemes are present within a diphthong, resulting in an r-colored vowel. See Appendix E for a complete list of words.

phoneme	/l/	/r/
Example	play	grew

**Table 6: Phoneme Location at the Syllable Level- Blends.** Phonemes are present within a consonant cluster, resulting in a blended sound. See Appendix F for a complete list of words.

### Synthesis

Children's author Aaron Shepard provided many important tips that were key in putting the story together. He recommended setting the story in a place that is interesting or familiar to children (Shepard, 2000, p. 20). *The Lonely Robin* is set in a garden and in a zoo. Children are familiar with gardens, and most likely have one in their own backyard or at the home of a relative. A zoo is a place that many children are likely to have visited with their parents or as part of a school field trip. It is familiar, yet interesting enough to keep the reader's attention.

The flow of the plot is another factor that is vital to keeping the reader's attention. A successful children's story is simple and direct (Shepard, 2000, p.60). Action must occur throughout the story and follow a logical sequence of events. Background is important to the story, but it is important to have something happening at the beginning of the story (Shepard, 2000, p.18). Shepard also recommends using dialogue whenever possible to allow the reader to relate to the story (Shepard, 2000, p. 20).

Another important factor to consider when creating a children's book is the level of repetition within the story (Amoss & Suben, 1997 , p. 35). The plot of *The Lonely Robin* is repetitive: The robin identifies a potential friend, he tries to play with the animal, and he identifies a reason why their friendship is incompatible. Minor variations on this pattern repeat throughout the book until the problem is resolved.

### Revising

The revision process was continual over the course of the semester. Editors included the faculty advisor, as well as family and friends. Grand Valley State University's Fred Meijer Center for Writing & Michigan Authors proved to be an invaluable source throughout the entire writing and revision process. The author worked with multiple consultants at the Writing Center,

and sought out expertise from those who specialized in Creative Writing and Elementary Education.

### **Reading Level**

Originally, the author had intended the book to be for emergent readers aged 3-5 years old. However, this age did not take into consideration the development of liquid speech sounds. The /l/ and /r/ English phonemes may not be mastered until a child is 8 years old ("Speech & articulation development chart," 2003). The plot became more complex as the author continued to add details, and would not have been appropriate for emergent readers. Using the Flesh-Kincaid Grade Level Analysis as a reference, revisions were made for *The Lonely Robin* to fit the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading level.

Consultants at the Writing Center provided great advice for making the story appropriate for 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading level. One of the author's biggest challenges was including vocabulary familiar to children of this age group. Advanced words such as *nocturnal* and *sauntered* were removed. One consultant wisely recommended to include words that followed traditional rules of reading and spelling. Reading is second-nature to most adults, so identifying words that a third-grader would have difficulty decoding required a lot of focus.

Another piece of advice offered by the Writing Consultants was to reduce the number of contractions used in *The Lonely Robin*. Some contractions are simple and would be understood by most children in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. These include *can't*, *won't*, and *don't*. However, other contractions are much trickier and hard to decode. Some contractions that should be avoided when writing at the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading level include *couldn't*, *shouldn't*, *wouldn't*, and *I'll*.

In addition to increasing the author's awareness of appropriate contractions, Writing Consultants offered advice about using adjective and adverbs. Many of the original sentences

were very complex due to the use of adjectives and adverbs. Some sentences were repetitive, and some had excess prepositional phrases. The Writing Center helped decipher what information was important. This information also had to be divided up between pages so that it made sense and had logical places to turn the page. The information was divided over more pages so that it was not overwhelming to younger readers.

### **Illustrations**

Illustrations also provided an excellent method for breaking up the text within *The Lonely Robin*. The illustrator, Erika Meints, is a biology major with a botany emphasis at Northern Michigan University. Erika has a special a special interest in fungi, which is a relevant topic in her current coursework. Each illustration subtly includes a mushroom as her personal artistic touch. The images were made using ink and watercolor. Each illustration was created to be as realistic as possible by referring to various visual resources during the process of illustration. Animals were personified and facial expressions were used to convey emotion. Watching the illustrations come together was a very neat experience. Erika is very talented and it was rewarding to collaborate with her on this project.

### **Clinical Use**

*The Lonely Robin* is designed to be used as a tool in speech-language therapy. For readers exposed to the book for the first time, *The Lonely Robin* can be used to assess generalization in a reading environment. The book can also be used for targeted articulation therapy. Word lists in the appendix can be used drill correct production of liquids in a variety of syllable positions.

One limitation of the words used in *The Lonely Robin* is that the target words were not all-inclusive. Words that had /l/ or /r/ sounds at all syllable positions for all vowels did not exist

in the story. It is suggested that these word lists be supplemented with other resources or nonsense words to target all vowels and syllable positions.

*The Lonely Robin* is primarily designed to address speech sound disorders. A further direction of investigation could include adapting the story for use in language development and disorders. The story provides inferential vocabulary and mental state terms, which facilitate critical reading skills. High lexical diversity encourages vocabulary growth through context cues, and promote critical reading skills. Small changes to the vocabulary and sentence structure (e.g. substituting *The raccoon was nocturnal* for *The raccoon stayed awake all night*) would better facilitate language and reading skills.

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## Appendix A

**Table A1: Phoneme Location at the Word Level.** Phonemes are present in the initial, medial, or final position within each word.

	/l/			/r/		
<b>Initial</b>	landed lark last late later leaf leaves	left let like lion lion's little lived	lizard lonely long looked looking looks low	rabbit rabbits raccoon replied rest	returned rhino rhino's rich robin	robin's rocky rushed wrestle wrestling
<b>Medial</b>	although animals calmly clothing delicious excluded explored family family's feeling felt filled finally flew flight flipped	flower flowers fly flying gold hello help himself included lonely only play playing playmate plenty	polish polishing puzzled quickly quietly replied shoulder sleep slithered smallest smiling themselves told valued wrestling	approached area around bird birdhouse brave breath burst carry chirped course cried dark discovered disrespected dressed ears everything explored first	flowers forest friend friends from garden grass grassy great grew group heard heart horn important lizard offered parents returned scared	searching sharp short slithered sorry source starting surprised through tired tomorrow trapped tree trees true turned understand very wonderful
<b>Final</b>	able all beautiful bundle feel	gentle hopeful little pile pool	steal still will wonderful wrestle	after another answer are before far father flower for hear	later more mother near never or other over share	shoulder sure there together under water were wonder your



## Appendix B

**Table B1: Phoneme Location at the Syllable Level- Prevocalic Position.** Phonemes are present before a vowel in the syllable position.

	/l/	/r/
/i/	calmly family family's leaf leaves	lonely only quickly quietly
/ɪ/	delicious little lived lizard wrestling	rich
/e/	late later	
/ɛ/	left let	rest wrestle wrestling
/æ/	landed last	rabbit rabbits raccoon
/ə/ or /ʌ/		rushed
/ʊ/	looked looking looks	
/o/	lonely low	
/ɔ/	long	
/ɑ/		robin robin's rocky
/aɪ/	like lion lion's	rhino rhino's
/ɑr/	lark	

## Appendix C

**Table C1: Phoneme Location at the Syllable Level- Intervocalic Position.** Phonemes are present between two vowels in the syllable position.

	/l/	/r/
/i/-/ɪ/	feeling	
/ɛ/-/o/	hello	
/ɔ/-/ɛ/	smallest	
/aɪ/-/ɪ/	smiling	
/æ/-/u/	valued	
/ə/-/aʊ/		around

## Appendix D

**Table D1: Phoneme Location at the Syllable Level- Postvocalic Position.** Phonemes are present after a vowel in the syllable position. Note that no /r/ phonemes in the postvocalic position. See Appendix E for diphthongs containing r-colored vowels.

	/l/
/i/	feel steal
/ɪ/	filled still will
/ə/ or /ʌ/	able animals beautiful bundle finally gentle hopeful little puzzled wonderful wrestle
/u/	pool
/ɔ/	all although
/ɑ/	polish polishing
/aɪ/	pile

## Appendix E

**Table E1: Phoneme Location at the Syllable Level- R-colored Vowels.** Phonemes are present within a diphthong, resulting in an r-colored vowel.

Diphthong	Word	
/ɪr/	hear near	
/ɛr/	area carry parents scared share there very	
/ə/	after another answer discovered father flower later mother never other	over shoulder slithered tired together under understand water wonder wonderful
/ɜ/	searching sure surprised were	
/ɔr/	before for forest more or your	
/ɑr/	are far sorry tomorrow	

## Appendix F

**Table F1: Phoneme Location at the Syllable Level- Blends.** Phonemes are present within a consonant cluster, resulting in a blended sound.

	/l/		/r/	
<b>Blended Sounds</b>	calmly	help	approached	grew
	clothing	himself	bird	group
	excluded	included	birdhouse	heard
	explored	play	brave	heart
	felt	playing	breath	horn
	flew	playmate	burst	important
	flight	plenty	chirped	lizard
	flipped	replied	course	offered
	flower	shoulder	cried	returned
	flowers	sleep	dark	sharp
	fly	slithered	dressed	short
	flying	themselves	ears	source
	gold	told	explored	starting
			first	surprised
			flowers	through
			friend	trapped
			friends	tree
			from	trees
			garden	true
			grass	turned
			grassy	
			great	