

## What works and What doesn't: High School Students with Reading Difficulties



Jade Wexler , Sharon Vaughn , Greg Roberts and Carolyn A. Denton have recently published the results of a study they carried out to observe the effectiveness of a couple of commonly-used strategies for improving the reading of poor readers.

With 96 students from grades 9-12 (ages 13-17) all of whom had significant reading difficulties, they implemented a program of 15-20 minutes instruction daily for 10 weeks using three methods: **repeated readings, fluency training, and typical instruction.**

It is well known that fluency is a major problem for poor readers, and treatment of this symptom is often used at primary school level. However, it has not been studied at secondary level. Both repeated reading (re-reading the same text several times) and wide reading (reading extended amounts of text but not repeating the reading) are both strategies that have been used. In this study they were compared as follows.

### Repeated reading

Participants were paired with a better reader and each read the same text three times each day. Modelling for the lower-level reader was incorporated by having the higher-level reader read the passage first. Students were taught how to provide immediate and corrective feedback during the week prior to implementing the intervention. Each student reviewing missed words with their partner after their second read. For example, one student would say to his/her partner: "Here are the words I underlined. Let's read these together." Partners would then review all missed words. After the final read, they summarised the text to each other.

### Wide reading

Everything was the same as in the repeated reading condition, except that each partner read three different texts one time each while the partner followed along. So each pair was exposed to six different texts.

When the lower-level reader could read 100 words per minute with fewer than 5 errors, the reading level was raised.

### Typical instruction

This was mostly preparing for the reading section of the state-wide tests, and typically consisted of silent reading and answering comprehension questions.

A more detailed description is in *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice 25, 1, 2-10* Published online February 2010.

### Results

Outcomes were measures using pre- and post tests of fluency, comprehension and word identification. Neither intervention proved better than just silent reading and answering questions. In the words of the authors, "The current study does not support the practice of

providing fluency interventions utilizing peer-pairing formats for severely impaired high school readers. Students in this study had significant reading disabilities, with pre-test scores in the 5th percentile or lower on standardized measures of word recognition, passage comprehension, and fluency. An important implication of this study is that the implementation of practice activities in the absence of direct instruction may be inadequate for high school students with such severe reading impairments.

“Since we conducted this study, Chard, D. J., Ketterlin-Geller, L. R., Baker, S. K., Doabler, C., Apichatabutra, C. (2009). Repeated reading interventions for students with learning disabilities: Status of the evidence. *Exceptional Children*, 75, 263-281 have examined the research addressing the effectiveness of the repeated reading approaches for improving fluency for students with learning disabilities. They report that “repeated reading should not be considered an evidence-based practice for students with learning disabilities.”

The implication is that, if your high school student with Specific learning Difficulties is not receiving direct, explicit instruction in word reading (for example), then the interventions he or she is receiving will probably not help them to develop their reading skills.

*Review by Dr Paul Whiting.*