

5 Ways to Build Skills in a Beginning Reader with a Learning Disability

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The ability to read is a phenomenon in the truest sense of the word. The fact that our species is not only capable of such an amazing feat, not to mention the ability to produce writing, is nothing short of amazing when compared to the remainder of the animal kingdom. The requisite skills to decode symbols, match those symbols with sounds, and discern meaning from the combination of those symbols and corresponding sounds takes years for even the most gifted students to master. Many students with learning disabilities have an incredibly difficult task when it comes to developing the skills necessary to read phonetically, much less to read for meaning. This is such a daunting challenge, that many students shut down in the face of it and never truly learn to read or read at a lower level than is expected of them for the duration of their academic careers, and even their lives. A lesser challenge, though still incredibly difficult and at times disheartening, is helping these students with learning disabilities develop as readers who can truly engage and learn from text. With this in mind, this article sets forth five strategies for teachers who help struggling readers, specifically those students with learning disabilities that affect reading comprehension, decoding, or other problems associated with reading. These strategies are evidence-based interventions and have practical applications in the classroom.

Use Text-to-Speech When Possible and Practical

Text-to-Speech software (TTS) has been available since the 1990s, and special education and general education teachers have been reading to students with learning disabilities for even longer than that. Now, however, TTS is prevalent and included in software packages, embedded in websites, and browsers even offer extensions that read text aloud. The opportunities for utilizing this powerful strategy have never been easier to access or more abundant than they are now (Wood, 2017).

TTS tools are so powerful that adult learners, who learn more slowly and require more repetitions than minor students, can utilize TTS and almost immediately benefit from its inclusion in terms of reading fluency and decoding. This evidences the effectiveness of TTS on learners of all ages. TTS software can be found embedded in online textbooks, browser extensions, standardized tests, and numerous other facets of student resources and requirements (Wood, 2017).

When possible, TTS should be used by students with learning disabilities on the same devices as their fellow students without learning disabilities. This helps ensure inclusion. Some teachers and school systems insist on delivering TTS through eBooks or other specialized technology which sets students in special education apart from their peers and often include distracting features that take away from the students' ability to concentrate on the fundamentals and content they are reading (Gonzalez, 2014).

Preview the Text

Another potential game-changer for reading instructors of students with learning disabilities is the simple but effective strategy of previewing the text. This preview can come in many different forms, but serves the same purpose for the student with a learning disability, which is to let the young reader know what the text is about so that he or she can focus on the fundamentals of reading and still understand the content of the text. One of the most common strategies for previewing the text is the creation of a visual map. This graphic representation of characters, themes, words, and other stimuli that the reader will encounter in the text helps the student focus on the mechanics of reading, build confidence, and have a better chance of understanding the text (Pratt, 2020).

Previewing the text is one of the easiest to implement strategies that an instructor can employ to increase the reading ability of students with learning disabilities. Typically, students who engage with the text prior to reading understand more from the text and read more efficiently than peers who do not engage in a significant preview of the selected text. Students can preview the text by simply reading the title, headings, and subheadings, or something more involved with a note catcher or graphic organizer. This strategy can be effective when reading fiction, informational text, or any other relevant reading selection that the instructor chooses (Pratt, 2020).

Don't be Afraid to Read the Same Text Multiple Times Because Repeated Readings Build Confidence

A distinct strategy which serves much the same purpose as previewing the text is repeated readings. This strategy builds confidence and allows for comprehension through repeated readings of the same text. The student with a learning disability, many of whom struggle through texts on a daily basis, are able to build confidence and truly engage in a text with repeated readings of the same book, article, or other stimuli. The idea is that through repeated readings, students will build confidence and focus on the mechanics of reading in an environment that does not feel pressured or frightening to the struggling reader. To further the non-threatening nature of repeated readings, some studies utilize puzzles, riddles, and even video games. (Murray, 2023).

Many students report that repeated readings make them feel more comfortable in the academic setting, which is a setting that many of these same students self-reported not feeling at ease in for many years. Another way to increase the comfort level of students with learning disabilities with repeated readings is to pair the readings with a reward system or engaging

delivery system, like puzzles or video games. Repeated readings, when paired with video games, have shown to be effective in increasing textual engagement and the comfort that students with learning disabilities feel with the text (Murray, 2023).

Table 3: Mean scores for Group 1 by intervention phase.

Measure/name	Pre	RR+AVG	RR-alone	Post
WCPM				
Betty B	97	103	101.3	108.25
Bobster	66.5	70.25	69	78
PL				
Betty B	101.5	107.375	109.8	118.75
Bobster	85	88.75	77	92
PWC				
Betty B	95.50	91.64	93.68	91.15
Bobster	79.13	85.59	89.41	85.02

Table 4: Mean scores for Group 2 by intervention phase.

Measure/name	Pre	RR+AVG	RR-alone	Post
WCPM				
Fortune	79	80.6	76.3	90.5
Mulan	89	91.83	91	100.25
Sky Clifton	59	67	58.8	52
PL				
Fortune	81.5	83	80.4	92
Mulan	95.75	98.33	98.66	103.25
Sky Clifton	68.75	73.5	66.5	55
PWC				
Fortune	96.9	97.25	93.26	98.37
Mulan	92.82	93.3	92.57	97.28
Sky Clifton	83.37	91.20	88.54	94.70

Table 5: Mean scores for Group 3 by intervention phase.

Measure/name	Pre	RR+AVGs	RR-alone	Post
WCPM				
Apple Crumble	50.75	75.70	70.0	85.75
Best Queen	81.5	105.5	100.45	117.25
Hydrogen Bond	69.5	84.8	64.3	85
PL				
Apple Crumble	65	81.8	77.1	88.75
Best Queen	92	111.6	108.1	121.5
Hydrogen Bond	88.25	107.2	86.3	108.75
PWC				
Apple Crumble	81.27	92.0	91.0	96.4
Best Queen	88.62	94.6	90.89	96.35
Hydrogen Bond	78.37	79.11	74.37	77.92

Another potential pairing with repeated readings could be vocal music masking. Combining repeated reading with vocal music masking (RVM) has great potential to increase not only a student's ability to read, but the enthusiasm with which he or she attacks the document. RVM, in some studies, showed improvement in almost every area of reading comprehension and fluency. This study provides more evidence that repeated reading, especially when paired with stimuli which serve to increase the efficacy of repeated reading, produces positive results in students with learning disabilities (Leloup, 2021).

Work on Phonemic Awareness

Many students with learning disabilities, especially those students with dyslexia, struggle mightily with phonemic awareness. To the detriment of elementary education, phonics were overlooked by many teachers and school districts for a number of years in favor of sight word memorization. Luckily, phonemic awareness has worked its way back into the general curriculum and remains useful in the special education curriculum as well. This crucial ability evades so many of our struggling readers, but there are sundry strategies to work on this skill specifically. An instructor can make a huge difference in a child's ability to read and communicate by taking time to focus on this core competency (Torgeson, 2001, pg. 38).

Some studies suggest that intensive instruction on phonemic awareness can result in students with learning disabilities exiting special education programs. Instances of program exiting occurred, in some cases, two years after the intensive instruction. Ideally, struggling readers would receive intensive instruction in phonemic awareness twice daily for six to nine weeks, or roughly one grading period. If a shorter, less intensive approach is continued after the grading period of intensive instruction, then these students stand a better chance of reading with correct mechanics and for understanding. (Torgeson, 2001).

Use a Variety of Decoding Strategies

The last of our five methods for helping struggling readers is to implement with fidelity a number of decoding strategies. Knowledge of multiple decoding strategies is desirable because the strategy that works for one struggling reader might simply confuse another student with a learning disability, while that student might thrive with a different decoding strategy. We will examine three of the most common decoding strategies to help reading instructors develop a broad base from which to pick the best method for their individual students.

Text-to-speech software is a form of Assistive Technology (AT) that can aid students with weaknesses in decoding. Often at their discretion, the students with a learning disability in reading fluency can choose which words he or she would like read to them via speakers or in their headphones. This AT can help the student decode through increasing the familiarity with letter-sound relationships (Dawson, 2018).

Customizable fonts allow the teacher to color code text to clue the special education student in on certain letter chunks or vowel sounds. Additionally, the student themselves can customize their own sentences and make a key to break down words according to chunks and letter-sounds. Meaningful interaction can result in decoding information being stored in long-term memory (Dawson, 2018).

Word prediction software can be particularly useful to the struggling writer and reader. As a student progresses in the ability to utilize software, the student can attempt to write a word and with only a portion of the word spelled correctly can have the word they need spelled for them. This can give a student with a learning disability the confidence they need to continue progressing through reading materials (Dawson, 2018).

Summary

Learning to read is difficult, all the more so if you are a student with a learning disability. Only slightly less difficult is equipping a student with the requisite skills to begin to read to learn and understand text. These five tools are not panacea for students diagnosed with dyslexia or learning disabilities in reading comprehension and fluency, rather these are tool that both the general and special education teachers can use to chip away at the wall preventing some very bright students from learning to meaningfully read.

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