



# Florida Literacy and Reading Excellence Professional Paper *Teaching Non-traditional Learners*

*“To obtain a complete picture of overall reading development, it is important to observe the way that the child integrates all sources of information about words in text, and this can only be estimated by carefully observing children as they read connected passages.”*

~ Joseph K Torgesen, 1998, p. 39

Catch Them Before They Fall. *American Educator*, 22(1,2), pp. 32-39

## **TODAY’S CHALLENGE**

A major emphasis in education today is ensuring that all students become successful readers. With the diverse learning needs in classrooms, teachers are faced with many challenges as they plan and deliver reading instruction to meet the learning goals of their students. One of the challenges is providing appropriate reading instruction for students identified with specific learning disabilities that focus on their individual needs. According to the United States Department of Education (2002), the majority of students identified with specific learning disabilities receive instruction in the general education classroom. The number of students with specific learning disabilities continues to grow at a steady rate, rising 28.5% since 1991-1992 (USDOE, 2002). In 2001, the United States Department of Education reported that 2,887,217 students with specific learning disabilities were being served under IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act). With this steady increase, it is critical that all teachers develop an understanding of learning specific to those identified with learning disabilities and become knowledgeable about providing effective instructional practices to ensure their students become successful readers and meet the accountability standards set in place today.

## **NON-TRADITIONAL LEARNERS**

IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act) defines a specific learning disability as a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write,

spell, or do mathematical calculations. The President’s Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002) reported that 80% of students identified with a specific learning disability are there because they have not learned to read. A student’s disability can impact reading in different ways depending on the specific processing system involved. Catts and Hogan (2003) describe a classification system useful in planning intervention efforts for students identified with reading disabilities. This model classifies students with reading disabilities (low-progress readers) into three subgroups: dyslexia, language learning disabilities, and hyperlexia (Catts & Hogan, 2003).

1. **Dyslexia** – Students with dyslexia have needs in phonological processing resulting in difficulties with word recognition. Students with dyslexia have adequate language abilities. Specific areas of needs for readers with dyslexia may include (a) difficulties learning sound-letter correspondence, (b) difficulties segmenting and blending sounds in words, (c) making very little progress in acquiring reading skills, (d) difficulties reading unknown words and lacking strategies to find the word, (e) difficulties with high frequency words, (f) laborious, non-fluent reading, and (g) oral reading filled with substitutions, omissions, and mispronunciations (Shaywitz, 2003).
2. **Language-Learning Disability** – Students with language-learning disabilities have language impairments and difficulties with word recognition and comprehension. The primary need involves all aspects of language, including both the sounds and the meanings of

words (Shaywitz, 2003). These readers may have deficits in semantics (vocabulary/meaning), syntax (structure of language), and morphology. These language needs can impact word decoding, word recognition, and understanding. “A small vocabulary can limit the number of words available for recognition, while other language needs can reduce the contextual knowledge a reader may use to identify a low frequency word” (Nation & Snowling, 1998).

3. Hyperlexia – Students with hyperlexia have adequate to exceptional word recognition, but have difficulties with comprehending text and vocabulary. Shaywitz (2003) reported that students with hyperlexia might exhibit needs in reasoning and abstract problem solving. It is possible for students to enter school with strong phonological skills and significant needs in comprehension and vocabulary, but this type of learner is rare (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001).

Catts and Hogan (2003) noted that the categorization does not lead to homogeneous subgroups with clear demarcations between them. Students with reading disabilities may exhibit different degrees and a combination of characteristics stated above.

### **IMPORTANT CHARACTERISTICS OF READING INSTRUCTION FOR STUDENTS IDENTIFIED WITH READING DISABILITIES**

According to the Report of the National Reading Panel, effective reading instruction for all students includes explicit, systematic instruction in phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. Based on NICHD research, the most useful interventions for those identified with reading disabilities include a combination of explicit and direct instruction in phonemic awareness, sound-symbol relationships (phonics), contextual reading, and reading comprehension skills (Lyon et al, 1997). Students with these learning challenges benefit from the same effective reading instruction as all readers do. However, the delivery of instruction may differ. Foorman and Torgesen (2001) state that instruction for children who have difficulties learning to read must be more

explicit and comprehensive, more intensive, and more supportive than the instruction required by the majority of children.

- Explicit and Comprehensive – Reading instruction for students with reading disabilities must be more explicit and comprehensive than the typical instruction provided for grade level readers. As good readers read, they notice useful generalizations. However, students with reading disabilities may have difficulties generalizing and transferring newly learned skills and knowledge. These students need a comprehensive approach that is explicit in modeling and instruction that makes connections for the students among the various components of the literacy process (Houck-Ray & Olliff, 2004).
- Intensive – To intensify instruction for students with reading disabilities, Foorman and Torgesen (2001) suggest two guidelines: (1) increase time for reading instruction and (2) provide reading instruction individually or in small groups. They further suggest that the most practical way for increasing instructional intensity for students with reading disabilities is to provide small group instruction. Children with reading disabilities will learn more rapidly under conditions of greater instructional intensity than they learn in typical classroom settings (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001).
- Support – Students with reading disabilities or students who are at-risk will benefit from emotional and cognitive support (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001). Emotional support refers to providing feedback and reinforcement throughout instruction. Cognitive support or scaffolded instruction involves finely tuned interactions between the teacher and student that support the learner in accomplishing a task that he or she could not do without the teacher’s help (Foorman & Torgesen, 2001; Stone, 1989). Foorman & Torgesen (2001) describe two types of scaffolding: careful sequencing and teacher-student dialogue. Careful sequencing involves systematic instruction, gradually building skills in a sequential manner. Teacher-student dialogue

refers to the explicit interactions between the student and teacher focusing on the thinking involved during the reading process.

## **PRINCIPLES FOR EFFECTIVE READING INSTRUCTION**

Low-progress non-traditional learners may experience difficulties acquiring, generalizing, and retaining newly learned knowledge and skills. The National Center to Improve the Tools of Educators at the University of Oregon has identified six principles for effective instruction. These principles are key to designing reading and content reading instruction to meet the instructional needs of diverse learners who are in need of intensive and systematic reading instruction (Simmons & Kameenui, 1998). The six principles include big ideas, conspicuous strategies, mediated scaffolding, strategic integration, judicious review, and primed background knowledge.

- **Big Ideas** – Big ideas refer to focusing reading instruction on important, key information. This important information can serve as building blocks to future learning. Big ideas make it possible for students to learn the most as efficiently as possible and serve as anchoring concepts by which “small” ideas can often be misunderstood (Simmons & Kameenui, 1998).
- **Conspicuous Strategies** – Students with reading disabilities often lack a repertoire of reading strategies and need explicit instruction in learning and internalizing effective strategies for reading. Strategies that are generalizable and conspicuous facilitate the most efficient learning for students with specific learning disabilities (Simmons & Kameenui, 1998). For example, when teaching phoneme manipulation, a teacher may explicitly manipulate the individual sounds through concrete representations, such as Elkonin boxes and tiles, colored blocks, or magnetic letters and apply the skill to a more authentic task.
- **Mediated Scaffolding** – Mediated scaffolding involves teachers providing a continuum of support to learners as they learn a new skill or encounter a difficult skill. The goal of

scaffolding is to assist the learner appropriately, gradually reducing the assistance to ensure independence. Students with reading disabilities may need scaffolding to assist their learning as they acquire new knowledge and skills. Scaffolds can be physical, visible, and auditory and are often integrated. Examples of scaffolds may include visible prompts, such as Elkonin boxes and tokens, teacher generated lines, and visual organizers. Scaffolds can be auditory, such as verbally prompting a reader when he or she encounters an unknown word. Teachers may need to physically prompt a student by guiding a student’s finger below an Elkonin box as he practices hearing sounds in words.

- **Strategic Integration** – Students with reading disabilities may struggle with making connections among concepts or ideas. Explicitness is the key to integrating and linking concepts and skills. Simmons and Kameenui (1998) refer to this principle as strategic integration. They stress the importance of being strategic and explicit as the teacher assists students in understanding how key concepts relate to other concepts to avoid confusion. For example, when connecting letter-sound correspondence to phonemic awareness, the teacher can introduce the physical representation of a phoneme or sound to demonstrate their relationship.
- **Judicious Review** – Students with reading disabilities will often need many opportunities to practice what they have learned in order to be successful. Purposeful practice and review will assist students in retaining what they have learned and applying the new skill in different contexts. Guided practice provides students with a continuum of support as they practice the newly learned skill. Daily review provides opportunities to build background knowledge and develop fluency and automaticity.
- **Primed Background Knowledge** – Successful acquisition of new information depends largely on the knowledge that the learner brings to a task, the accuracy of that information, and the degree to which the

learner accesses and uses that information (Simmons & Kameenui, 1998). For students with reading disabilities, it is important to elicit their background knowledge through explicit conversation and reminders before introducing the new information.

## CONCLUSION

For non-traditional learners or students with reading disabilities to become successful readers, reading instruction should focus on the strengths and needs of the individual student. Students with reading disabilities will benefit from comprehensive reading instruction focusing on phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. However, delivery of instruction will need to be more explicit, intensive, and supportive in order for successful reading to be achieved.

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