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Hybrid Language Experience Approach: Supporting Students with Word-Level Reading Disabilities

By Robbie Svegel

Introduction

Despite multisensory, structured phonics instruction, my class of third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade children with reading disabilities—otherwise known as word-level reading disabilities (WLRD) or dyslexia (Fletcher, 2007)—did not learn phonics strategies to decode words effectively and develop word recognition. They had first-grade reading skills, average intelligence, and above average frustration. The instructional approach presented in this paper grew out of my desperation to seek a better way for my students to enjoy reading and improve their word recognition skills. In order to better meet their needs, I combined several instructional practices: a) a modified language experience approach (LEA); b) assistive technology of computer text-to-speech software; c) student retellings, and d) repeated oral guided feedback. My students were engaged and motivated by this approach, and their reading performance exceeded all of my expectations. In this paper I share what this experience was like for my students as learners, and myself as a teacher.

Rationale for My Approach

Several factors led to the development of the approach explored in this paper. First, the principle of teaching from strength to weakness indicated a language experience strategy as students' oral language far surpassed their reading skills. Combined with this, the reading material was of high interest, highly motivating, and challenging in terms of language and writing style. Second, my experience has been that many upper elementary students with learning disabilities did not respond very successfully to explicit, structured, direct instruction phonics programs, frequently forgot vowel sounds, and were unable to sound out words accurately. I previously provided them these students with Orton-Gillingham-based instruction. The result was a great deal of time spent in direct instruction and practice, with limited improvement in reading decoding, word recognition and overall reading level.

Language Experience Approach

Historically, language experience stories have been accepted as an approach to teaching reading for students with WLRD. The language experience approach is a whole word as well as language-based method, using the child's own spoken language as the basis for reading. The LEA approach integrates listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Typically, the class shares an experience, such as a field trip. Afterwards, the class discusses the experience, and the teacher asks for oral accounts of the experience.

The teacher then scribes the students' words for them, using their own language, so that the learners watch her write the words they spoke. Next, the class or student reads back what they just said as the teacher points to each word. Rereading, sequencing activities, and sentence strips are used to reinforce word associations and build a reading vocabulary. Hoffner (2004) effectively adapted the LEA for secondary level students with WLRD to improve content area reading skills. In addition, Ward (2005) achieved successful results using the LEA for students with severe WLRD. Most of my students had been diagnosed with working memory weaknesses, which interfered with the skill of blending words effectively. The whole-word emphasis of the LEA, rich with meaningfulness, rather than emphasis on phonics taught disconnected from authentic text, also matched the students' cognitive strengths by allowing them to work with words in the context of meaningful print.

Assistive Technology

Building off of this research in LEA, I considered how assistive technology could provide a vehicle for LEA with my students. Assistive technology is increasingly being used in different ways to improve student learning. The availability of a free, user-friendly text-to-speech feature provided a good fit for my students' repeated readings. Assistive technology allowed for: a) accurate, immediate audio feedback of

printed text; b) individualized, independent control over reading practice; and c) reading rate varied to individual needs.

Repeated Readings

Repeated readings with guided feedback lead to automaticity in identifying the printed word, essential for WLRD students (Shaywitz, 2003). Olson and Wise (2006) found that computer-assisted instruction can play an important role in improving the word level reading of struggling readers. One fascinating and surprising finding of their research occurred in a study with second- through fifth-grade struggling readers. One group of readers received whole word guided text-to-speech feedback, while another received phonics intervention along with text-to-speech feedback. Although secondand third graders in the phonics/computer group read significantly better on untimed word reading and spelling, the results were opposite and unexpected for older readers. The fourth- and fifth-grade students who received computer support alone read statistically significantly better on measures of untimed word reading and spelling than students who received phonics training as well. These findings supported my decision to include text-to-speech technology as a tool to enhance my students' reading growth.

Putting It All Together: Instructional Approaches

Thirteen students with word level reading disabilities, from third through fifth grade, participated in this program over a period of 2 school years. Their reading levels, as measured on multiple measures: STAR (2001), KTEA-II word recognition subtest (2004), and running reading records, varied from beginning to end first-grade level.

Hybrid LEA reading instruction was implemented daily for 30-40 minutes throughout the course of the school year. The reading instruction consisted of 4 main parts: 1) I read novels to the students; 2) students retold, or summarized chapters read to them; 3) students reread with guided oral feedback; and 4), students created a class book by illustrating each chapter retelling.

Students listened to teacher-read novels throughout the school year. Books were chosen on the basis of high interest, quality literature, or popularity of series to foster transfer to independent reading. They were at the students' listening comprehension level and ranged from 2 to 3 years above their reading level. Some texts were chosen from the popular

children's *Magic Tree House* series by author Mary Pope Osborne (2000) in order to provide background knowledge about the series, its characters, the format of the book, and the way the series uses elements of narrative and nonfiction; this would serve as an entrée to independent reading of this series. In addition, the *Magic Tree House* series contains both fiction and non-fiction elements, which appealed to most students. Other novels selected were those read in general education classrooms so that students in my classroom could be engaging with some of the same texts as students in the general education curriculum.

After I read each chapter, the students retold it. This student-led retelling of a novel is where I deviated from the classic LEA approach of entirely student-generated text. As a result of the changes I made in implementing LEA, students incorporated both stylistic elements and vocabulary from the text as part of their summaries. Students were engaged in retelling the main events of every chapter we read. They became critical of the content and reviewed it for accuracy. Because I scribed their words, the language stayed more complex; students did not have to consciously think about written language skills of spelling, grammar, and syntax. This also eliminated any decoding difficulty during rereading due to handwriting and spelling errors students would have made. Below is an example of a class retelling from *Danger on Panther Peak*, by Bill Wallace (1985). Notice the use of descriptive words as well as sentence variety and complexity in the oral retelling.

Chapter 5

The boys were hanging out together and got bored. Tom picked up the comic book and took Justin to his secret place. First, Justin had to promise that he would not tell anyone about it and the boys went to get a little food before they left.

After a couple miles of hiking the boys arrived at the secret place and went swimming in the clear pool of water. There was a rope swing that Tom put there and a waterfall to swim under. After a while they got hungry and Tom swam under the waterfall to go grab the food, but he felt like someone was watching him. Then he looked around, but nothing was there. In the next minute he saw that there was a big black cat watching him on the boulder. It disappeared quickly, but all Tom saw was four legs, a tail, and black body, he thought it might have been a panther. He screamed and went back under the waterfall to tell Justin.

Next, students reread the retellings with guided oral feedback using technology tools. Prior to beginning the readings, classrooms were set up with a text-to-speech program for listening to stories. We used Word Talk (Macaulay, 2010), a free download available from http://www.wordtalk.org.uk. Word Talk can be used with any Microsoft Word document and offers understandable voices; students can select the rate of speech and change font and color of text. Text can be read by the word, sentence, paragraph, or entire selection. Each word is highlighted as it is read to reinforce printed/spoken word association. To view a video clearly explaining Word Talk on Teacher Tube, see *A Free Tech Tool for Struggling Readers* at http://www.teachertube.com/viewVideo.php?video_id=1488&title=Free_Tech_Tool_for_Struggling_Readers

This "talking computer" proved to be an excellent tool in providing immediate, accurate feedback. Students could practice "on demand" without needing a partner or the teacher to help them. They were independent learners. In addition, the computer was connected to the TV in the classroom. This enabled students to view text directly as the teacher typed into the Word document. Finally, networked computers enabled students to reread text in their homerooms, intervention room, and all computer labs.
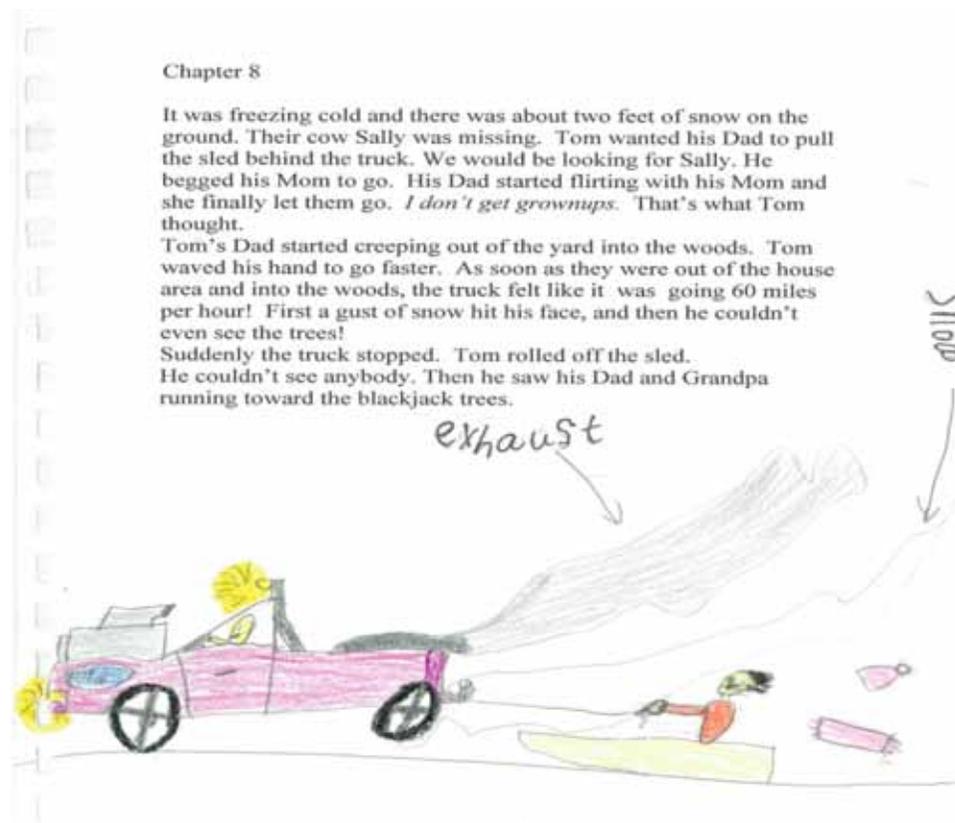
As chapters were finished, students took turns illustrating the important events from the chapter retellings. Once the novel study was completed, the retellings and illustrations were bound into a class book, which became popular as free choice reading material. Below is an example of a final illustrated page, showing the complexity of the retelling and the match of picture to text.

This sequence of read, retell, revise, reread (4Rs) occurred for each chapter. Each day students read the new chapter retelling as a whole class and then again at least one more time with the talking computer. Students also chose to read all or part of the actual chapter in the book itself as well. For all subsequent chapters, the class reviewed the previous day's lesson, then read the new chapter, and retold, revised and reread (4Rs) in the same fashion as day one.

Additional Reading Activities

In order to encourage practice to improve fluency and word recognition, additional reading activities occurred:

- *Partner Reading.* Students took turns reading to each other, giving guided feedback and asking questions about the chapter retelling.

- *Musical Reading.* Chapter retellings were placed at different stations around the room.

Chapter 8

It was freezing cold and there was about two feet of snow on the ground. Their cow Sally was missing. Tom wanted his Dad to pull the sled behind the truck. We would be looking for Sally. He begged his Mom to go. His Dad started flirting with his Mom and she finally let them go. *I don't get grownups.* That's what Tom thought.
Tom's Dad started creeping out of the yard into the woods. Tom waved his hand to go faster. As soon as they were out of the house area and into the woods, the truck felt like it was going 60 miles per hour! First a gust of snow hit his face, and then he couldn't even see the trees!
Suddenly the truck stopped. Tom rolled off the sled.
He couldn't see anybody. Then he saw his Dad and Grandpa running toward the blackjack trees.

A 2-minute timer was set. Students read and reread their chapter for 2 minutes then rotated to the next station, until all stations were visited.

- *Sequencing of Chapters*. A pile of retellings, without chapter headings, in scrambled order, was placed in front of each child. The object was to place chapters in the correct sequence.

- *Word Study*. Students searched for spelling patterns, most frequently used words, or words from weekly phonics units on personal copies of text.

- *Fluency Checks*. The students participated in activities such as Beat the Clockusing a student-chosen passage once a week—anything we had read that week, but not earlier. Students chose partners for 1-minute timed reading samples. They reread at least 3 times before testing, either to their partners or themselves, at the computer station. They recorded both accuracy and correct words per minute. Finally, they graphed words correct per minute. Their goal was to beat their words-correct-per-minute each week. The students loved to try for their personal best each week. This activity was highly motivating and gave students a tangible, visual record of progress.

Profiles in Student Learning

While this literacy intervention was not a study with controlled variables or statistical analyses that controlled for confounding variables, I was able to observe changes in my students' reading behaviors, which I would like to build on in the future in helping to reduce the reading gap:

- One third-grade student no longer met the discrepancy criteria for WRLD. Over the course of 1 school year his reading level went from non-reader to average for grade level. While I cannot claim that this was due to the literacy intervention, I do know that he now gets "in trouble" for reading in class, not defiant acting out behavior. He chooses lengthy chapter books and non-fiction selections and reads at home—something alien to him prior to this reading success.

- One fourth-grade student, with an initial reading level of end first grade, was placed into novel groups in homeroom reading class without any reading accommodations; she was successful in reading chapter books at end second-grade level independently, with excellent comprehension.

- One fourth-grade student was placed into regular reading class without any reading accommodations at the beginning of the following school year.

- One fifth-grade student whose reading level on formal measures plateaued at end first grade for 2 school years improved to independently reading chapter books 1-2 years above his tested level with good comprehension.

- One student, whose reading level continues to test beginning second grade, developed the confidence and determination to independently read a lengthy novel, *Mackinaw City Mummies* of the *Michigan Chillers* series (2001), which was 2 years above his reading level. He obtained 90% on an Accelerated Reader test (1985), indicating excellent comprehension.

- Several improvements in fluency occurred. One student changed from halting sound-by-sound oral reading that sounded like a machine gun at the beginning of the year to fluent reading of material 1 year more advanced by the year's end. Another student went from near non-reader to fluent on slightly lower than grade level material by the end of one school year. Finally, a third student with language processing disabilities read fluently without long response times.

In this hybrid language experience program, students read material far above their reading level immediately after studying the novel. Students responded with enthusiasm to reading material that stimulated their minds. They were engaged in quality retellings since the demands of writing itself went to the teacher as scribe. They were motivated by the assistive technology support for repeated readings.

Many factors contributed to students' reading improvement: a) repeated readings with guided feedback from the computer text-to-speech program, peers, and teacher; b) exposure to material at oral comprehension level; c) retelling and revision; and d) high levels of engagement and motivation. Future study should focus on which of these, or which combination of these practices, yields the most benefit for students. Data collection needs to be refined, possibly using DIBELs (Good & Kaminski, 2002) data

for both accuracy and fluency, as this would enable a more direct comparison of transfer of these reading dimensions from a small study to a broader one. Future use of a control group and both percentiles and standard scores on measures of reading fluency and comprehension would allow additional clearer determination of the impact on closing the reading gap.

For some, the process of learning to decode words through phonics can be long, frustrating, and discouraging. This hybrid language experience approach offers a promising alternative for learning to read, particularly for older elementary students. I am excited by the positive impact this approach had on my students' literacy and hope that further research in hybrid LEA explores its efficacy for other readers.

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