



Late literacy

David and **Juile Baker** offer inspiration for pupils with a history of failed literacy acquisition.



Introduction

There has been an emphasis recently on attainment in literacy, with claims by the Education and Skills Select Committee that 1 in 5 children do not achieve the expected levels of literacy by the age of 11 and that a compromise in the techniques of teaching reading is in fact compromising the education of many children.

So how do we address this? What is to be done for the group of pupils coming to the end of their primary education experience without a real grasp of reading? For these pupils in particular, any attempt to teach on the basis of word recognition, 'look and see', or a mixed approach has already failed, and a structured phonic approach is really the only alternative. Whether poor literacy acquisition is due to a specific learning difficulty (such as dyslexia), having an autistic spectrum disorder (ASD), attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), poor attendance, or general disaffection we have to give the pupils a second chance.

Success for pupils who have had a history of failed literacy acquisition is only achieved by using a structured, sequential, phonic scheme, which provides opportunities for a multi-sensory approach, and allows for variable student learning styles. Students with difficulties in literacy acquisition will



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require opportunities for over learning to ensure security in the phonics learned.

So what's new? I hear every primary head teacher and SENCO in the country saying the following:

- ❖ You can lead a student to the book, but you cannot make him or her read. How do I find suitable materials for Key Stage 2 pupils still working at basic phonic levels?
- ❖ I know what I need to provide, but I do not have the time and/or money to produce it.
- ❖ Effective learning depends upon effective delivery.

- ❖ These students have failed in the past and are often disaffected.
- ❖ Over-learning and constant reinforcement requires a broad range of interesting and enjoyable, non-repetitive resources and activities.

A phonic approach to literacy is not a solution in itself, but is a strategy, and it is a strategy that requires effective tools to be successful. So what are the most effective tools for a busy school, working to a tight budget, and with increasing numbers of learning support assistants (LSAs) expected to deliver effectively?

Interest

When learning to read – and struggling – it is not enough to try and hammer in even phonetically based prose that is dry. The reader needs to be interested, to want to see what will happen once the page is turned. If that can make them laugh, and make the teacher laugh as well, there is a motivation to continue the text and to move on to the next step. There is an important knock-on effect in that last sentence. If the teacher enjoys the work this will always rub off on the pupil and motivate them further. After all, that is what charismatic teachers do all the time, and they do it naturally.

Incremental success

It is easy to give up – especially when the work is hard and there is no light at the end of the tunnel. Resources need to be in manageable bite-sized chunks. Reading books need to be achievable in one sitting yet hold enough of a story for the pupil to have read something of substance.

Incremental success should be a by-product of a structured and progressive scheme of work. Working through the phonemes in a logical and structured order, reinforcing on the way, will give obvious transition points where the pupil can feel confident and proud they have mastered an aspect of literacy that was previously a mystery. It also gives a logical structure to the content of the readers, enabling bite-sized delivery and incremental success.

Incremental success is not only motivational for the reader, but within the framework of a structured and progressive programme it also enables effective measurement of progress.

Multi-sensory stimulus

Pupils who have previously failed have often done so because the input did not meet their own learning style. For a programme to be successful it should accommodate learning through visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic input. It should allow pupils to experience reading and spelling through a variety of activities.

New phonemes should initially be introduced using magnetic or wooden letters. In this way the new phoneme is met with visual, auditory and kinaesthetic input. Words incorporating the phoneme should then be created using letters, cards, drawing in sand,





finger painting etc., whilst verbalising what is written. The pupil should then have access to reading material exposing them to only that new phoneme and previously learnt phonemes from the structured and sequenced order.

Ideally pupils should be able to highlight the newly learnt phoneme from the reading material, so photocopyable readers are ideal, allowing tracking and even personalisation of resources without spoiling them for future users.

Varied activities

Reinforcement is evidently critical to success. Reader materials need to be supported by worksheets, based upon a combination of exercises that are either stand-alone or that refer back to the characters and stories that have already been introduced in the readers.

Introducing a 'theme' that flows through all the resources can make them appear more connected to each other, and reinforce the relevance of the activities. For instance, a word-search is more compelling and relevant as an activity if the words are from a particular piece of text that has been read to teach the phoneme during the reading activity.

Another component is that of games. We firmly believe that games are crucial to learning and skills acquisition. The games should refer to the characters and plots from the readers and the workbooks to make them relevant and 'connected', but should also be able to stand-alone. This gives further opportunities to integrate the games into a lesson plan that includes both the readers on the scheme, and those who have already mastered literacy skills, and have no knowledge of the scheme

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content. Games can take a lot of preparation and 'invention', so it is helpful if they can be included within the resources that provide the basis of the literacy scheme.

Finally, you have read the book – now read the play! Play scripts can be very important for developing the confidence to read aloud, as well as developing co-operation and teamwork. If these play scripts can reflect story lines used within the literacy scheme itself, those still acquiring the skills are better able to participate as they are familiar with the plot. The plays should give the reader the opportunity to more fully enjoy the stories by going into more depth. Although the language is more advanced, the story is already familiar and stronger readers can pull along their fellow actors.

Fun!

It seems so blindingly obvious, but all too often it is neglected. If there is a choice between making literacy acquisition fun, and making it a chore with boring books and boring exercises, where will the better results come from? And for teachers or LSAs, who have to help a struggling reader master the

basics, enjoyment is essential. Everyone will deliver a programme more enthusiastically if it is a pleasure for both the teacher and the learner.

In conclusion, to address the growing concerns over literacy and to encourage our young people to read we need to use the correct tools. Whilst the phonic approach is likely to be the most effective it needs to be delivered in a structured, and progressive way enabling pupils to achieve success quickly and regularly in incremental steps. To maintain interest and enthusiasm, the message needs to be reinforced in several different ways – with games, worksheet activities, and plays supplementing the written text. The answer is simple, and has always been so – through phonics, through fun!

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