

Reading Instruction for Students with Learning Disabilities

by Dr. David Moore and Dr. Michael Smith

FOR EDUCATORS OF OLDER STUDENTS with learning disabilities (LD), the increasing expectations for advanced literacies require increasingly sophisticated instructional responses. Research reviews on teaching reading to adolescent students with LD testify to the importance and timeliness of this issue, and they present valuable instructional guidance (Edmonds, 2009; Faggella-Luby & Deshler, 2008; Gajria et al., 2007; Roberts et al., 2008; Torgesen et al., 2007). This research tends to emphasize three areas of instruction: 1) word study, fluency, and vocabulary, 2) comprehension, and 3) motivation and engagement. It shows that when research-based reading instruction is implemented, older youth with LD can succeed.

Word Study, Fluency, and Vocabulary Instruction

Word Study Reading research at the secondary-school level distinguishes basic word study instruction in phonemic awareness and phonics from advanced word study instruction in multisyllabic and morphologically derived words (Roberts et al., 2008). Many older students with LD can decode single syllable words but struggle to decode longer words. Whether older readers struggle with basic or advanced word study, they can improve. Youth with underdeveloped word study can make small to moderate gains in reading comprehension when they receive instruction that builds word study along with comprehension (Edmonds et al., 2009).

Fluency Students having LD tend to read haltingly, laboring over word and sentence structures. Fluency instruction helps students process texts automatically, freeing cognitive resources for comprehending the texts (Roberts et al., 2008). Fluency instruction is effective when it engages readers with texts that embed targeted

words. Repeated exposure to such words is more useful than encounters with numerous unfamiliar words in overly difficult passages. Engaging youth with quantities of texts they can and want to read, then supporting their efforts with the texts supports fluency. Research with older readers who struggle with fluency suggests that targeted fluency instruction, like targeted word study instruction, is most effective when it is part of a complete intervention that includes comprehension (Edmonds et al., 2009).

Vocabulary Knowing the meanings of many words is crucial for success in reading and academics. Struggling readers tend to avoid reading, thus limiting their acquisition of new vocabulary. In addition, many of the textbooks used by older students with LD offer inappropriate support for vocabulary learning (Roberts et al., 2008). The research points to direct instruction as well as to activity-based and computer-assisted methods as effective methods to improve vocabulary acquisition (Faggella-Luby & Deshler, 2008). It is important to note that students with LD may require more exposures to new words than other students in order to develop deep understandings of the words. Along with teaching the meanings of specific words, instruction is needed to develop youth's independent vocabulary learning strategies such as analyzing words' contexts and morphological composition. Assessment of students' vocabulary knowledge and progress monitoring are other important features of vocabulary instruction.

Comprehension

Domain and Prior Knowledge Secondary students with LD are required to read a good deal of informational and expository text, and they often struggle because they fail to link their prior knowledge

to the texts' contents (Gajria et al., 2007). Activating prior knowledge involves readers in calling up what they already know about a topic and using this knowledge to make sense of a text's ideas and information. Key ways to help readers utilize and develop the knowledge they need include anticipatory activities such as previewing headings or discussing key concepts before reading, and review activities such as paraphrasing and summarizing after reading.

Graphic Organizers Graphic organizers can benefit readers greatly before, during, and after reading (Roberts et al., 2008). Before reading, they serve as ways to activate prior knowledge and make predictions. During reading, they help students capture connections among ideas. After reading, they facilitate students' consolidation of a text's contents. Students benefit from the ability to match graphic organizers with corresponding types of text. A graphic organizer for comparing literary characters is different than one for depicting historical timelines.

Cognitive Strategies Older readers with LD who fail to apply cognitive strategies such as determining importance and self-questioning benefit from explicit direct instruction in these strategies (Edmonds et al., 2009). These youth do especially well when they learn to apply strategies before, during, and after reading. The most effective instruction begins with a teacher explicitly modeling and explaining the use of a strategy, then gradually releasing to students the responsibility for using the strategy independently (Torgesen et al., 2007).

Motivation and Engagement

Interesting Texts and Goals As students move up the grade levels, their texts become more difficult and the instructional environment tends to deemphasize their motivation to read (Roberts et al, 2008). Providing texts that students want to read is a widely known approach to improving reading motivation. Research establishes the gains readers with LD can make when engaging, relevant texts are at the core of a lesson (Faggella-Luby and Deshler, 2008). Motivation and engagement also improve when students actively define their learning goals. Instructional research supports a combination of interesting texts and goals along with instruction in reading strategies (Roberts et al., 2008). When students develop interest and control in their learning, when they take an active role in their learning, achievement improves.

Social Interactions Struggling readers' motivation and engagement can be increased through meaningful, collaborative learning opportunities (Roberts et al., 2008). Older students tend to become motivated and engaged when they interact with one another, responding to texts and ideas worth talking about. Collaborative learning tasks increase student ownership of their literacy learning, generate rich thinking, and can be expected to improve reading achievement (Faggella-Luby and Deshler, 2008).

Applying the Research

Edge is based on instructional principles derived from the top research in adolescent literacy. Furthermore, effectiveness research has shown *Edge* to lead to substantial growth in language, reading comprehension, and vocabulary. Throughout this innovative language arts program, older students with LD find unmatched supports that can improve their reading and develop their motivation to be lifelong readers and learners.

Language and Vocabulary Instruction *Edge* provides comprehensive vocabulary instruction that is appropriate for older readers with LD. The program provides rich and varied language experiences that embed multiple opportunities for word study and vocabulary development. *Edge* explicitly teaches critically important academic vocabulary along with strategies for learning such words. The program regularly promotes word consciousness as well so students will be motivated to develop vocabulary incidentally.

To help teachers bring best practices into their classrooms, *Edge* provides Daily Vocabulary Routines. These routines can be part of daily instruction. They expose students to targeted vocabulary multiple times, a practice that is very important for struggling readers with LD. In addition, *Edge* presents numerous opportunities for students to read targeted vocabulary words in context and to reinforce their understandings through various experiences.

Along with the vocabulary routines, *Edge* provides Daily Oral Reading Fluency Routines such as timed repeated readings. Various routines are presented so teachers can select different ones over time and keep their fluency instruction fresh.

Edge also features the Online Coach. The Online Coach's structured supports give struggling readers with LD a private, risk-free way to improve pronunciation

and fluency, acquire academic vocabulary, and work through comprehension tasks. The Online Coach links to the literature selections in *Edge*, providing immediate feedback and record keeping as students read orally and silently.

Edge assessments provide progress monitoring and re-teaching opportunities. These assessment for learning tools enable students and teachers to refocus and refine their academic efforts.

Comprehension Getting readers off to a good start certainly is crucial in the early grades, but ongoing instruction in the later grades is necessary for maintaining and, in many cases, accelerating readers' growth. The cognitive strategy instruction found in *Edge* was designed with the principles of direct, explicit instruction and a show, don't tell approach that is very appropriate for older students with LD.

Traditional comprehension instruction consisted of having students read a selection then asking them questions about it. This is problematic for at least two reasons. First, the questions are passage specific. Answering a question about one passage doesn't teach students how to answer questions about other passages. Second, in asking a question, the teacher or text has done the interpretive work by calling readers' attention to a particular aspect of the passage. Readers need to know how to focus their attention independently.

Edge takes a different approach. Each *Edge* unit opens with an overview of one of its seven comprehension strategies, then each unit cluster follows with explicit step-by-step explanations of how to apply the strategy to different passages and genres.

The "Big Seven" reading strategies found in *Edge* are

1. Plan and Monitor
2. Determine Importance
3. Ask Questions
4. Make Inferences
5. Make Connections
6. Synthesize
7. Visualize

These general strategies are known to promote reading comprehension. In every instance, the explanatory steps contain model responses so students actually see an example of what is being emphasized; no step is merely mentioned. With *Edge*, students with LD receive the direct, explicit instruction they need to develop the cognitive strategies that will help them be better readers.

One of the great challenges of teaching older students with LD is the difficulty they often have transferring what they have learned to new situations. This is why *Edge* provides students plentiful opportunities to apply their strategies in a variety of reading contexts.

Motivation A crucial aspect of motivation is believing that you can succeed, something that is especially important for older students who have been told for years that they are not good at reading. The *Edge* explanations of each comprehension strategy fit students' funds of general knowledge and facility with everyday strategic thinking. In *Edge*, students see how the strategies they already use outside of school apply to their reading comprehension strategies inside of school. This practice permits students to believe they can succeed; it encourages students to begin applying their everyday strategies to their academic reading.

Students are also motivated by the Essential Questions (EQs) that are at the center of every unit. The EQs and the meaningful reading selections

in *Edge* which speak to adolescents have been shown to engage youth in sustained reading. They provide superb contexts for explicit, direct instruction in the components and processes of reading. Because EQs have no single simple answers, they require students and teachers to take on new roles. Students become active agents in their learning, and teachers become part of the inquiry, too. The generative discussions about the EQs and reading selections contribute much to the notable improvements in comprehension, motivation, and engagement youth have demonstrated with *Edge*.

Conclusion

Edge provides older students with LD rich and meaningful opportunities to take control of their reading. It effectively supports students' word study, vocabulary, and fluency; comprehension; and motivation

“A crucial aspect of motivation is believing that you can succeed.”

and engagement. *Edge* provides the resources that youth with LD require in order to comprehend complex reading material.

Bibliography

Edmonds, M. S., Vaughn, S., Wexler, J., Reutebuch, C., Cable, A., Tackett, K. K., & Schnakenberg, J. W. (2009). A synthesis of reading interventions and effects on reading comprehension outcomes on older struggling readers. *Review of Educational Research*, 79(1), 262-287.

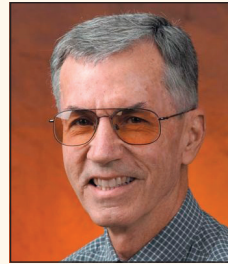
Fagella-Luby, M. N., & Deshler, D. D. (2008). Reading comprehension in adolescents with LD: What we know; what we need to learn. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, 23(2), 70-78.

Gajria, M., Jitendra, A., Sood, S., & Sacks, G. (2007). Improving comprehension of expository text in students with LD: A research synthesis. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 40, 210-225.

Roberts, G., Torgesen, J. K., Boardman, A., & Scammacca, N. (2008). Evidence-based strategies for reading instruction of older students with learning disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research and Practice*, 23(2), 63-69.

Torgesen, J. K., Houston, D. D., Rissman, L. M., Decker, S. M., Roberts, G., Vaughn, S., Wexler, J., Francis, D. J., Rivera, M. O., & Lesaux, N. (2007). Academic literacy instruction for adolescents: A guidance document from the Center on Instruction. Portsmouth, NH: RMC Research Corporation, Center on Instruction.

Authors



David Moore, Ph.D.
Arizona State University

Dr. Moore taught high school social studies and reading in Arizona public schools before entering college teaching. He currently teaches

secondary school teacher preparation courses in adolescent literacy. He co-chaired the International Reading Association's Commission on Adolescent Literacy, and his twenty-five year publication record balances research reports, professional articles, book chapters, and books. Noteworthy publications include the International Reading Association position statement on adolescent literacy and the Handbook of Reading Research chapter on secondary school reading. Recent books include *Teaching Adolescents Who Struggle With Reading* (2nd ed.) and *Principled Practices for Adolescent Literacy*.



Michael Smith, Ph.D.
Temple University

Dr. Smith has focused his research on how experienced readers read and talk about texts, as well as what motivates adolescents' reading

and writing both in and out of school. He has written eight books and monographs, including "Reading Don't Fix No Chevys"; *Literacy in the Lives of Young Men*, for which he and his co-author received the 2003 David H. Russell Award for Distinguished Research in the Teaching of English, and *Going with the Flow: How to Engage Boys (and Girls) in Their Literacy Learning*.