

Challenging Reading for Students with Mild Handicaps

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Placing students with special needs in curriculum tasks that maximize both short- and long-term learning is a good idea, but one that is seldom practiced effectively. Placement on easy tasks seem to be preferred, regardless the effects of such placement on learning. Perhaps we expect easy tasks to be learned quickly and thus promote a sense of confidence in learners. Hard tasks, on the other hand, are expected to be learned slowly, or not at all, and may undermine learner confidence and motivation.

Special educators and school psychologists generally recommend placement of special education students in relatively easy tasks. In the field of reading, this practice is traceable to the work of Betts (1941, 1946), who suggested instructional placement at a level at which the learner could read with 95% to 98% accuracy. This placement tradition is still at work today. For example, according to Hargis (1982), reading at more than 8% initial errors constitutes "reading levels that induce frustration and failure, are nonproductive, and so should be avoided" (p. 107). Even more succinctly, Mercer and Mercer (1981) stated that "reading material at this level [10% errors] cannot be used for instruction" (p. 269). However, questions are beginning to be raised. Addressing the general issue of literacy, Cadenhead (1987) has asked whether we have not become too reliant on procedures that carefully control reading levels and place students in unchallenging materials. Powell (1984) has provided new placement criteria for informal reading inventories that have the effect of placing students in somewhat more challenging material.

Precision teachers have been aware of the problems associated with placement on easy tasks for some time. McGreevy (1978) epitomized the precision teaching approach to placement with a slogan: "Easy to do, hard to

learn; hard to do, easy to learn." Research published so far supports the outcome predicted by this slogan. The work of Johnson (1971), Neufeld and Lindsley (1980), and Gerent (1983) provides evidence that placement on more difficult tasks often results in improved rates of learning.

This article describes a method for placing students in challenging reading materials and also describes simple procedures for reducing errors and building oral reading fluency.

The Challenging Reading Method

The strategy for presentation of reading material at challenging placement levels consists of the following four steps: assessment, daily timings, error correction, and rate pacing. Reading passages may be developed from a variety of sources, including any standard basal reading series or high-interest material from books, newspapers, or magazines. Passages should be divided into segments of 185 to 200 words and ordered from easy to progressively more difficult reading material. We used passages from the Ginn Reading Series (1982-1984) (levels preprimer through 8) and Jamestown Publishers' Timed Reading Series (Spargo & Williston, 1980) (levels 9 through 12).

Although we transferred the passages to probe sheets (i.e., printed each segment on separate pages), passages may also be marked in the reading text. Probe sheets may take some time to prepare initially, but they are convenient and can be reused.

Words per minute (wpm) should be recorded for both correct and incorrect responding. Incorrect responses include omissions, substi

tutions, repetitions, and mispronunciations. Words read true to the text and quickly self-corrected responses are counted as correct. The frequencies for correct and error responding are charted on a Standard Celeration Chart.

The participants in this study were 16 elementary school children from the P. K. Yonge Laboratory School who were participants in an after-school tutoring program. The median age of the children was 8 years and 6 months, with a range of 7 to 10 years. The median grade level was second, with a range from first to fourth. None of the learners was in special education due to learning problems, although all had been recommended for the tutoring program due to their teachers' concerns about their failure to make adequate academic progress. School policy did not permit the use of traditional special education classifications; rather, it promoted the extensive use of regular class accommodations and after-school tutorial programs. These children would be seen as being at high risk for special education placement if they attended a public school in Florida.

Procedure

Assessment

Assessment was begun at each learner's current reading level and proceeded through passages of different grade levels until a challenging passage was determined. A challenging passage is defined as one in which fewer than 83% of the words are read correctly (more than one error for every six words read). In practice, we attempted to find passages that were as close as possible to the 83% criterion. Thus, passages in which 17% to 20% of the words were read incorrectly were selected for teaching.

Daily Timings

Once a challenging passage was found, daily timings were implemented. During the timing, the learner was asked to read the passage for 1 minute. All errors were recorded and the last word read was marked. A follow-along sheet was convenient, but any method indicating the last word read would do. Learners who had not completed the passage at the end of the

timing were asked to continue reading until the passage was completed.

Error Correction

Only errors recorded during the first minute were corrected during this phase, using a two-step procedure. First, the teacher pointed to each word read incorrectly (target word), said the word correctly, and had the learner imitate the teacher's model. This correction procedure was repeated before the learner moved to the next target word. Next, the teacher said the two words on either side of the target word, along with the target word, and then asked the learner to imitate this five-word phrase. As with the first step, the word-in-context procedure was repeated one time. No other error instruction was provided.

Repeated Reading and Rate Pacing

Upon completion of the error correction procedure, a repeated reading and rate pacing procedure was implemented (Chomsky, 1976; Samuels, 1979). The teacher prepared an audiotape on which the appropriate passage was read at a rate approximately 30 wpm faster than the learner's current performance level. Learners were instructed to keep their eyes on the text and read along with the tape, imitating both speed and inflection. It has been our experience using this procedure that some learners are unable or unwilling to read as fast as the tape, even with encouragement. However, the procedure should not be discontinued based on this phenomenon. We have found that the ability to keep up with the tape is not predictive of celeration values. That is, even learners who seem to have difficulty keeping up make significant gains in reading rates. Headphones may be used during the procedure to minimize distractions. However, it is more difficult to monitor correct implementation with headphones.

Materials

To use the procedure described here, teachers need a supply of audiotapes on which passages are prerecorded at a variety of reading rates. One is recommended for each passage. For example, a fifth-grade reading passage would

be recorded on five tapes at 50, 80, 110, 150, and 180 wpm. These five levels can accommodate very slow to moderately proficient readers. Although making the tapes may take some time, it is a sound investment. Once they are made they can be used by many learners. Color coding them by speed of presentation makes tape management easier.

Making the tapes is fairly simple with a little practice. For each rate level, the teacher marks the word in the passage to which he or she must read by 15 seconds (s), 30 s, and 1 minute. For example, with the 80 wpm tape the teacher would mark 15 s at 20 words, 30 s at 40 words, and 1 minute at 80 words. These points help the teacher establish a pace. Using a timer, the teacher practices reading the 15-second portion a few times, and when the pace is appropriate, turns on the tape. The procedure is to announce the story title and the reading rate and then begin reading. A stopwatch helps with pacing, or an assistant can help keep the teacher paced correctly. The entire passage is read as the teacher models proper inflection and pronunciation and reads under the control of all punctuation marks. However, it is difficult to model correct inflection at lower rates. Production of a full set of tapes could be a project undertaken by a volunteer, a talented parent, or a highly skilled student peer.

Classroom Use

Some teachers might conduct the assessment portion of this technique and then have their aides work with the students on a daily basis. These teachers could monitor the charted data quickly and make changes in instruction, motivation, or level of task difficulty efficiently. Other teachers might prefer to work intensively with one child over 2 or 3 weeks for a short period of time each day in an effort to achieve a dramatic increase in reading fluency. Many students have convinced themselves that they cannot read successfully and may require the carefully data-managed "boost" that these techniques can offer.

Effectiveness

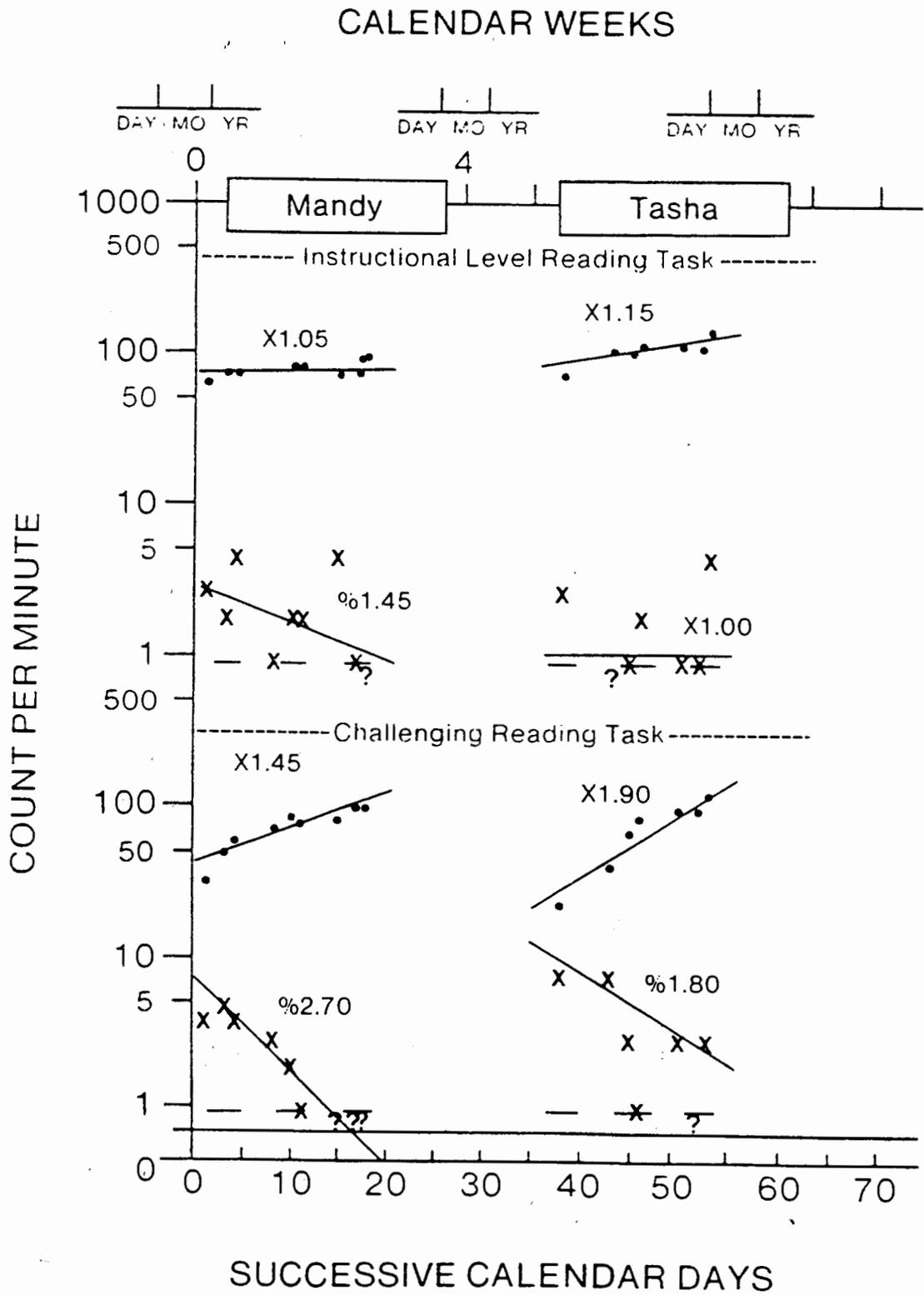
When these procedures were used to teach challenging reading passages, progress rates for both correct and error responses were high.

The teachers in this program used the Standard Celeration Chart and determined the rate of learning or *celeration* for correct responses and errors for each level of text difficulty. The data presented here are based on 32 comparisons of learners' performances on instructional and challenging reading tasks. Instructional tasks are those on which initial errors do not exceed 5%. Challenging tasks are those on which initial errors exceed 17% (1 error for every 6 responses). In our work all learners showed higher or equal celerations for correct responding. Error progress also favored the challenging readings in 23 comparisons. In only nine comparisons was the instructional-level task associated with a faster deceleration of errors. Median celeration values provided a conservative measure of typical performance for the entire group of learners. For the challenging readings the median celeration values were $\times 1.73$ for correct responses and $+2.00$ for error responses. By comparison, the median celerations for the instructional level passages were $\times 1.35$ for correct responses and $+1.60$ for error responses. While the students started with a higher number of words read correctly per minute in the instructional reading level, they made greater gains (or, in precision teaching terms, had higher celeration values) with the challenging reading tasks.

Figure 1 presents the charted data or learning pictures for two students whose performances under the instructional-level and challenging conditions were representative. Mandy, an 8-year-old second grader, was referred for tutoring due to extreme restlessness and a short attention span. Her data, shown in the first panel, are fairly typical of reading instruction guided by traditional placement criteria. The celeration for corrects is flat, and a $+1.45$ reduction in errors (a reduction from 3 to 0 errors over 17 days) was obtained. For Mandy the instructional task was at the preprimer level and the challenging task was second-grade-level text. The overall learning rate for this plan was a modest $\times 1.52$. Performance on the challenging passage, by comparison, was better. Correct responding increased at $\times 1.45$ while error responding decreased at $+2.7$, for an overall learning rate of $\times 3.92$.

Figure 1

LEARNER PERFORMANCE ON INSTRUCTIONAL LEVEL AND CHALLENGING TASKS



Tasha, 10 years old and in the fourth grade, showed another pattern with a similar overall rate of learning (panel two). Her teachers were concerned about increasing episodes of daydreaming and withdrawn behavior linked with a decrease in her academic performance. Correct responding increased at $\times 1.15$, while error responding, having started at 3 per minute, failed to decelerate. The overall learning rate was $\times 1.15$. Tasha's performance on the challenging passage is a picture of successful data-managed instruction, with a celeration of $\times 1.90$ for correct responding and $\div 1.8$ for error responding. The relative difficulty levels of the instructional material and the challenging material can be seen in the fact that Tasha said 34 words correctly for each error on the instructional-level material versus only 3 words correct for each error on the challenging passage.

The techniques that produced these gains are relatively simple, and the necessary materials and equipment can be found or produced in any resource room or regular classroom. While these teachers were making a special attempt with each child in an effort to compare reading progress at two different levels, there is no reason to believe that the same kinds of gains could not be made by other students with mild learning problems.

Conclusion

For children who can progress rapidly under either level of difficulty, there are several advantages to using challenging reading material. These include reading more interesting and age-appropriate content, gaining confidence in their reading abilities, becoming more motivated to read, increasing their fund of knowledge, and developing flexible reading skills that are useful in the general community. It may be that educators have been unduly influenced by grade and difficulty levels and the criteria traditionally used to place students in these materials. Our experience and that of others cited in this article suggests that even students with handicaps are being underchallenged. When provided with a data-managed individualized reading program, children with learning problems can make rapid progress. Using the procedures described

here, we have found that most learners can make more rapid progress in material that is considerably more challenging than the material traditionally assigned.

However, when students are placed in challenging materials effective error-reduction and fluency building instructional procedures must be used. In our experience, some students will lack confidence or actually resist placement on tasks in which initial error rates are high. They have been conditioned to expect that they cannot succeed on materials on which they make many errors or on those with grade-level labels that communicate that the material is too difficult to attempt, learn, master, or enjoy.

Some learners will need a face-saving rationale for the errors they make, and all will need solid instructional support from the teacher, including effective prompting, error correction, and other procedures that are direct, intensive, and closely monitored on Standard Celeration Charts.

In our experience the period of insecurity on the part of the learner is typically brief; it is often followed by newfound confidence and motivation that show in higher energy levels, enthusiasm for the task, acceptance of instruction, willingness to practice, and positive statements about the task and about the learner's performance.

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