

Just the Words, Ma'am

The cause of most older students' reading problems is their laboured word identification.

By Kerry Hempenstall

There is a belief in education that problems in decoding words have been resolved by middle primary school and that any difficulties at upper-primary and secondary levels must relate to problems with the understanding of what is being read.

In Australia, it has been reported that 30% of students enter secondary school unable to read or write sufficiently well to adequately cope with the curriculum, and also 30% do not complete their schooling. That is a sad symmetry.

Surprisingly to many, research with secondary students has found real deficiencies in word-level reading, even for many students not considered slow or learning-disabled.

Though most of these students can recognize common words in print, they are not sufficiently fluent with irregularly-spelled or unfamiliar words. Their reading is often slow and their understanding is impeded by this lack of fluency.

A prerequisite of good comprehension is that text is read accurately and rapidly, such that getting the words off the page is largely automatic.

Humans have limited available attention and, when they use most of it simply decoding the words, there is correspondingly less attention available for comprehension.

The complexity of words increases markedly in upper-primary grades, and even more dramatically in the specialized subjects at secondary level.

For many students, their capacity to identify words falters under the challenge of these more unusual, often multi-syllabic, technical, and abstract words.

Laboured word identification leading to comprehension failure is a classic sign of the need for a strong phonics emphasis in the instructional process.

The aim of phonics teaching in a code-emphasis program is to make explicit the alphabetic principle, which maps letters onto sounds. It is crucial to understand the rules for this mapping, even though they have many exceptions.

The rules must be taught through explicit, unambiguous, and systematic instruction. As well, the students should read aloud every day to someone who can provide feedback and encouragement.

Unless careful attention is paid to regularly assessing reading accuracy and rate, it is possible to incorrectly assume that an older student's problem is simply one of comprehension.

Focusing instruction solely on comprehension activities (such as how to extract the main idea) misses an underlying cause of the problem – inadequate word-level skills.

There may well be language-based comprehension deficits to address additionally with some students, but alone such assistance is insufficient.

Several recent government and independent reports have pointed to a research consensus that teaching phonics strategies explicitly and systematically is crucial in ameliorating the high rate of reading failure, whether for beginners or for the perennially-struggling.

The crucial variable is not age but stage – whether child or adult, the path to facile reading is similar.

The problem should not be underestimated. Older students and adults may have unproductive habits strongly engraved by years of practice. Their lack of reading experience may have limited their vocabularies.

Many may be resistant to again tackle the skill area that has proved elusive in the past and provided for them only frustration and humiliation.

Older students' progress is usually slower than that of young children, requiring greater amounts of instruction and practice than is available to them within a typical secondary timetable.

It is apparent from research that early intervention (preschool, junior kindergarten) holds the greatest hope for reducing the effects of serious reading failure.

However, older students should not be ignored simply because early intervention is easier to implement and promote. Social justice requires us to provide for those students whom our system has failed in their earlier years.

A major obstacle to the remediation of students' reading problems in primary and secondary schools is the lack of adequate training for teachers in the most effective, research-supported approaches to teaching reading at their level.

Of course, schools have limited financial and teaching resources. A belief that student literacy problems should be resolved during students' primary years can also lead to mere token assistance and to short-term programs vulnerable to premature discontinuation.

Until serious policy commitment and effective training become the norm, too many of our secondary students will suffer from the gradual loss of contact with the curriculum that occurs when their basic skill deficits go uncorrected.

(Reprinted with permission from The Age, June 6, 2005, Melbourne, Australia. Dr Hempenstall is a senior lecturer in the division of psychology at RMIT University. He is the author of the very funny Whole Language Takes on Golf which can be found at www.rmit.edu.au/departments/ps/saffpgs/hempenart/whole.htm).