

Module 4.7 Understanding Word Reading Difficulties

Questions About Word Reading Difficulties

- Why do some students have difficulties with word-level reading while others do not?
- Why do some students struggle in learning phonics?
- Why do struggling readers have such limited sight vocabularies?
- Why do some students struggle with reading fluency?
- How does this all affect students learning English?
- Why do some word-reading interventions have such limited results while others have large results?

Why Some Students Have Word-Reading Difficulties

- Assuming adequate effort, opportunity, vision and hearing, word-level reading difficulties are largely based on the phonological-core deficit
- Alphabetic writing systems like English are based upon the phonology of spoken language
- Written letters do not convey words, but rather convey phonemes within words
- Alphabetic writing systems represent the oral speech stream captured and coded via letters representing phonemes in that speech stream
- Difficulty with phonemes means difficulty with reading

Why Some Students Struggle with Phonics

- Phonics requires:
 - Well-established connections between letters and sounds
 - Phonological blending, which is the ability to blend abstract phonemes to activate a spoken word
- Both of these require phonological/phonemic skills; children with the phonological-core deficit typically lack these skills
- Phonics is difficult for students who do not have sufficient phonological skills to be successful with phonics
 - Simply teaching them phonics does not automatically develop the necessary phonological skill in many such students

Why Some Students Have Limited Sight Vocabularies

- Memory for familiar, instantly accessible words is not based upon visual memory; rather it is based on orthographic memory
- Orthographic memory requires proficient letter-sound skills and proficient phonemic skills
- These proficient skills allows the phonemes unspoken pronunciations to be mapped onto the letters in printed words

- Students who lack letter-sound proficiency or phonemic proficiency, or both, cannot efficiently add words to their orthographic lexicons

Why Some Students Have Poor Fluency

- Reading fluency is a byproduct of the size of the students orthographic lexicon/sight vocabulary
- Students with limited sight vocabularies are going to move through text slowly, relying heavily on (typically poor) phonic decoding and contextual guessing, and therefore lack reading fluency

Impact on English Learners

- Skills needed for reading one alphabetic language typically transfer to reading English
- Word reading can progress reasonably well with proper instruction
- For word-level reading, the type of instruction we would use successfully with native English speakers also works well with students who are English learners

Why Some Interventions Work Better Than Others

- Reading practice has little benefit for students who cannot remember the words they read, yet is essential for those who can
- Instruction and intervention that is consistent with research on how word reading develops and how children remember words display highly effective outcomes, while instruction and intervention inconsistent with this research displays limited outcomes