

Closing the Gap for Striving Readers with Basic Language

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OVERVIEW

Underscores the critical link between early reading proficiency and future outcomes, emphasizing the significance of early identification and intervention in reading difficulties. This case study highlights that structured literacy instruction, particularly for struggling readers in grade 3 and beyond, can be highly effective. However, the challenge lies in ensuring teachers possess the necessary knowledge and skills to deliver this instruction effectively. Dyslexic students, in particular, benefit from direct and explicit phonological instruction, but many teachers have limitations in this regard. To bridge this gap, training programs that offer systematic structured literacy instruction, such as those accredited by IMSLEC, have shown promise in improving teacher knowledge and student reading performance.



Evidence demonstrates that students who are not reading on grade level by grade 3 have difficulty closing the gap. Furthermore, the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (2003) states that two-thirds of students who have difficulty with reading in fourth grade will have a higher chance of being incarcerated or receiving welfare, highlighting the importance of early identification and effective intervention in reading. Structured literacy instruction delivered in a therapeutic setting has been shown to be an effective intervention for students' growth in reading, specifically for striving readers in grades 3 and beyond.

English is a complex written system, and although someone may be a proficient reader, there is no guarantee they have the ability to teach the skills required for reading success, especially to those who demonstrate difficulties (Joshi, et al., 2009). Students with dyslexia benefit from direct and explicit instruction in the phonological structure of spoken language and letter-sound correspondences (Ehri & McCormick, 1998); however, many (Cohen et al., 2017; Cunningham et al., 2004; McCutchen & Berninger, 1999) have cited these as limitations in teachers' knowledge. Hudson et al. (2021) asserted that teachers who participate in training that provides opportunities to apply their learned knowledge and skills under expert guidance produced the largest growth in teacher knowledge.

One noted solution to positively increase teacher knowledge and influence student reading performance is to provide training in the systematic delivery of structured literacy as provided through courses accredited by the International Multisensory Structured Literacy Education Council (IMSLEC) that center on the explicit teaching of the structure of oral and written English in a logical manner (Ehri & Flugman, 2018). McMahan et al. (2019) demonstrated the success of such a program, citing continual gains in teachers' knowledge across the course of a two-year training program with continued growth beyond the program to certification. Thus, bridging the gap from research to practice.

One option for training is to become a Certified Academic Language Therapist (CALT). A CALT is trained to be clinically diagnostic and prescriptive, skilled in multisensory structured language, intensive with their instruction, and results-driven to address students' strengths and weaknesses (Academic Language Therapy Association, 2023). The path to becoming a CALT has rigorous requirements that include 200 hours of coursework, practicum lessons with expert guidance from a trained mentor, and 700 hours of clinical teaching in a variety of settings before sitting for the certification exam. As a result, students receive quality instruction from a knowledgeable and effective teacher. For striving readers who have not received this type of instruction prior to grade 3, a skilled teacher is imperative for closing the gap.

While one might be a skilled reader, it doesn't ensure they can effectively teach reading to struggling individuals...

THE PRESENT STUDY

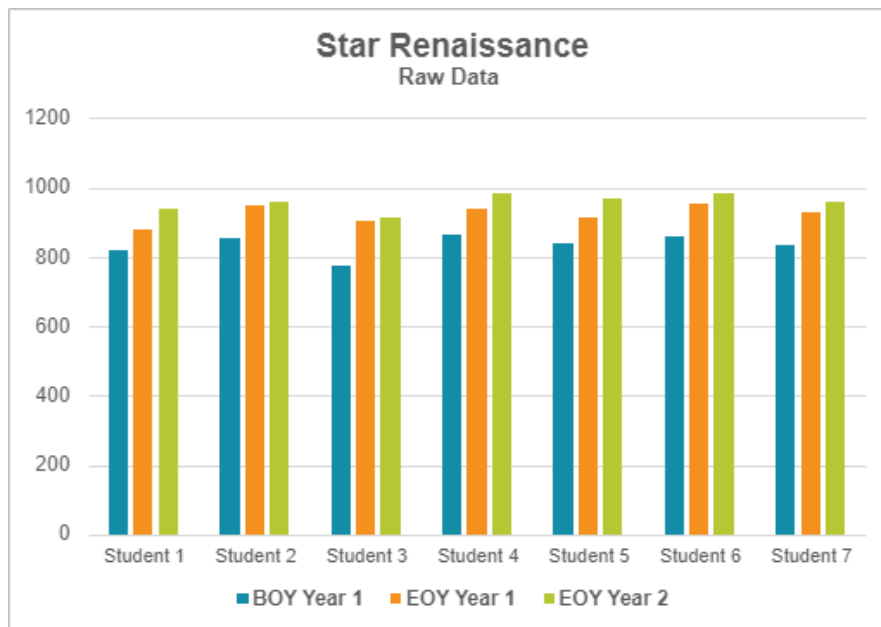
The present study follows, Cecily Smith, a 25-year veteran teacher serving as an Alabama Reading Specialist in a Title I school in rural Alabama. She was encouraged by her campus leadership to apply for a grant to participate in the Neuhaus Basic Language Skills (BLS) program to become a CALT. The data was collected during her training program to become a CALT. Students (n=7) were seen four days a week for a minimum of 45-50 minutes a day in a small group setting throughout grades 3 and 4. One group contained 3 students, while the other had 4.

RESULTS

Data were collected at the beginning of year 1 using the district benchmark assessment, Star Renaissance. This benchmark is a computer-based literacy assessment that produces a composite score showing the students' overall performance. Progress monitoring data were collected using mastery checks from the Basic Language Skills or BLS program. Subsequent data were collected at the end of year 1 and again at the end of year 2. Table 1 shows students' growth from the beginning of the year to the end of year 1. This growth continued across year 2 when supported by the Basic Language Skills intervention. The increase in student performance in year 1 was greater likely due to the explicit, sequential, systematic, diagnostic, and prescriptive nature of the instruction provided by a trained teacher.

Table 1.

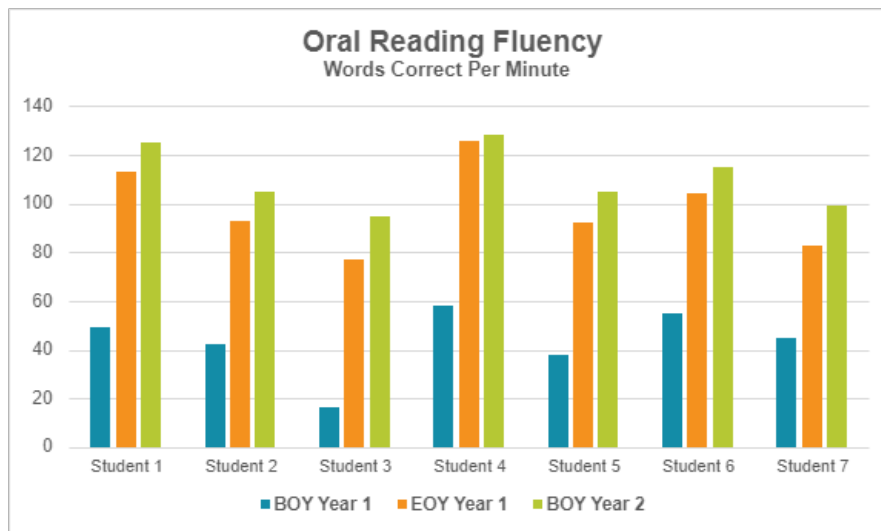
Star Renaissance Benchmark Assessment Results



Student data was also collected on oral reading fluency, as shown in Table 2, which is the number of words students can read correctly when timed for a minute. Again, there was a significant increase in the number of words students read correctly per minute in year 1. While students may not have met grade-level reading benchmarks, their personal growth was tremendous, demonstrating the benefits of the Basic Language Skills intervention for these students. It also reveals the benefits of consistent intervention for students with dyslexia who are not identified until grade 3.

Table 2.

Oral Reading Fluency Benchmark Results



STATISTICAL ANALYSIS

To determine the statistical significance of the intervention, a repeated measures ANOVA, or analysis of variance, was performed to examine the effect of the structured literacy intervention delivered by a trained teacher on the campus-wide benchmark assessment using Star Renaissance and oral reading fluency scores. Both assessments were administered at three time points: beginning of year 1, end of year 1, and end of year 2. Time served as the within-subjects factor.

Star Renaissance is a computer-based assessment used across the United States by many school districts to measure reading and math. A composite score is produced based on the scores obtained from the reading subtests. Results of these reading composite scores showed a statistically significant main effect of Time on their Star Renaissance benchmark assessment for reading [F(2,12)=175.15, p<.0001). The results point to significant improvement in their Star Renaissance reading scores across the three time points. In addition, the strategies and knowledge gained as a result of the intervention transferred to improvement on a computer-based benchmark assessment

Regarding oral reading fluency, results demonstrated a statistically significant main effect of Time on their oral reading fluency scores, [$F(2, 12)=257.31, p<.0001$]. The results indicated a significant improvement in oral reading fluency across the three time points. The structured literacy intervention program had a substantial positive effect on the participant's oral reading fluency. This finding underscores the effectiveness of the intervention and the importance of consistent instruction delivered by a trained and knowledgeable teacher.

TEACHER EXPERIENCE

Ms. Smith willingly shared her experience and insights from going through the Basic Language Skills training as well as the impact she noticed when using the intervention with her students:

"That summer, I took the 2-week class for Basic Language Skills. It was intense! I learned so much! I was a little worried about the amount of information, but I was assigned a mentor to help me throughout the practicum, and she was and still is amazing! I began working with 3rd-grade students in Book 1 in September 2021. Neuhaus had further training throughout the year that helped us review previous material and refresh our memories from our summer work. As I continued teaching the lessons to fidelity and providing daily instruction, the students really started to grow."

Ms. Smith reported that the students grew as readers and that 5 of the 7 students were able to meet the cut score on their state assessment at the end of one year of intervention, citing that many had not been able to meet that score in the previous year. Their confidence, their grades, and their ability to decode improved by leaps and bounds!

"The knowledge of the English language that I have gained from my training with Neuhaus has given me tools to help my students succeed. They have learned to read and write in cursive with confidence! Their self-esteem has flourished because they can read! I would recommend Neuhaus Basic Language Skills and any of the classes offered through Neuhaus to fellow educators. I wish that all reading teachers could participate in this training."

EXPERIENCE THE NEUHAUS DIFFERENCE

For more information about Basic Language Skills and other Neuhaus courses, visit neuhaus.org.



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Neuhaus Education Center is a nationally recognized provider of research-based literacy solutions dedicated to promoting reading success for all. By laying the groundwork for sustainable change, Neuhaus equips teachers to be diagnostic and prescriptive in recognizing students' literacy needs and how best to utilize the resources made available to them by their district.

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