Literacy Development – Struggling Readers

Questions and Answers

Can you clarify verbal reasoning please?

Verbal Reasoning is the ability to make sense of language. A good example is the ability to cope with analogies. Often you'll get a learner who can cope well with reading comprehension, but it's mainly because they have a good memory for information. They're not really interpreting the language itself. A learner with good verbal reasoning skills will be able to cope with inferential questions.

Interestingly you can often find the following scenarios:

- Bright dyslexic with poor memory skills - Copes with inferential questions, but forgets the detail.
- Lower-ability learner with good memory skills – Copes with factual questions, but didn't really understand the passage well.

This is also why you have to be careful with doing listening comprehensions with dyslexic learners. Often the advice is to do a reading comprehension and a listening comprehension and compare the two. The standard advice states that poor reading comprehension, but good listening comprehension indicates a dyslexic-pattern. In other words, comprehension is fine, but the dyslexic learner struggles to read the text.

In reality, this advice is not fundamentally wrong – there's just a catch with some learners. Because many dyslexic learners struggle with auditory sequential and working memory, they may have understood the passage, but have forgotten the detail.

So, if you're wanting to genuinely check listening comprehension with a learner you suspect is dyslexic, we would recommend doing your listening comprehension in the same way as a reader-writer works in an exam. In other words, read the passage, but provide the learner with the text to follow as well. This is what we would do:

- Present the learner with the text and questions.
- Read through the questions together (giving as much support as needed)
- Read the passage to the learner, letting him follow the text as necessary. Be prepared to re-read the passage or any parts of it.

In this way, you're genuinely checking comprehension, not auditory processing or memory skills.

Does onset and rime only work with two syllable words?

Onset and rime actually only refers to words with one syllable. In other words, breaking a single-syllable word into two 'chunks'. Your onset can be one letter (w – ing), two letters (br – ing) or three letters (str – ing).

Will you cover how we start with spelling?
We will do, but in another session. Our aim is to cover important research and theory in these first sessions, but follow up with webinars covering practice and methodology.

Obviously for those ones covering methodology, we'll be using StepsWeb and its supporting materials as examples, but the principles will apply to any evidence-based materials. Providing that programmes support a research-based teaching approach, it doesn't matter which you choose to use.

How does a class teacher cope with teaching individuals at an individual level when there are so many varying needs within a classroom? Not only intellectual but also behavioural.
To be honest, we believe that the only way is by utilising technology effectively. Never to replace teaching, but to enable a teacher to address individual needs within a class.

In the next webinar, we'll be covering the Four Tier model and talking about response to intervention approaches, which will clarify this issue further. We believe that many learners don't have significant learning difficulties as such, but they do take longer to progress and need more reinforcement, particularly in the early stages. Many of these learners fall through the gaps simply because they're not developmentally ready to move at the speed of the class. This would explain why the proportion of older learners struggling with literacy is significantly greater than the numbers you'd expect from your dyslexics or those with other identifiable learning challenges.

Interestingly, the range of literacy levels within the typical class is absolutely massive. A few years ago, we tested all the children in a particular year-group. This was a local rural school, so it was only 52 children in total, all aged 7 or 8. We found that some learners in this group were 2 years behind chronological age, but a few were up to 4 years ahead of chronological age (reading and spelling). So, in a relatively small group of 7 and 8 year-olds, there was actually a 6 ½ year spread of literacy level. Makes a nonsense of "Here's your spelling list. I'll test you on Friday." It also makes it virtually impossible to cater for every need without technological support, which luckily is available nowadays.

With StepsWeb, it's possible for every student in the class to work at his/her own level, with the programme automatically analysing each learner's errors and creating individualized reinforcement. It's not only a way of addressing individual needs, but it also provides continuity. The literacy progression can go through the whole school, with each learner moving at his/her own speed from one school year to the next. The programme analyses each learner's errors and provides individualized reinforcement, but it also analyses accuracy for reading/spelling, comprehension/language and phonics knowledge and skills. So a teacher can easily identify students needing extra support in any of these areas.

We believe that's the main reason why so many schools are switching from using StepsWeb with just their remedial and ESOL learners to using it as a whole-school resource. It's only the remedial and, perhaps ESOL, learners who need the workbook materials. The others will do just fine with the online activities, plus printable worksheets as needed.

What about students with Auditory Processing difficulties- excellent vocabulary, reading just slightly below age, poor comprehension, poor spelling.

These aspects need to be integrated into the literacy methodology. It's not enough to just cover the content - we have to develop the skills too - but in context. This is why we believe that it's not realistic to have separate 'reading programmes' and 'spelling programmes'. We need a literacy programme, which incorporates and reinforces those skills in context.

We believe that there are two key gaps which learners fall through. Some struggling from the earliest stages, and are the ones who are generally picked up as remedial learners and sometimes diagnosed as dyslexic. However, there are others who seem fine in the early stages, but then start falling behind at about 9 or 10 years of age. Many of these learners plateau at roughly that level for spelling and sometimes for reading. We're currently working with a high school which has identified that over 1/3rd of their intakes are reading at below a 9 year level. Huge issue, of course! You actually need a reading level of 11-12 years to cope with high school materials.

What sort of spelling program do you recommend?

I hate to confess this, but we are a little biased here! StepsWeb is designed to teach all of the skills needed for both reading and spelling. All words are seen and used in context, so we generally see the same gains in comprehension and vocabulary.

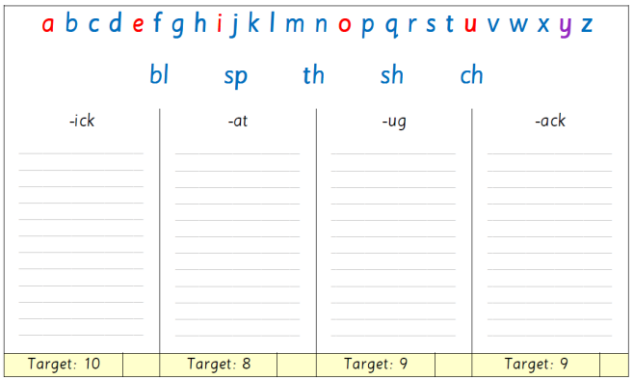
However (being serious now!), there are many literacy programmes which work in a research-based way and it's very much up to individual schools or teachers to choose the resources which they believe best fit their needs. Although we quote examples from StepsWeb and its supporting materials, the principles and methodology we cover actually apply to all research-based materials.

If a child is working with rhyming patterns and offering for example -og = log dog Mog bog

In an oral exercise, I would praise the attempt (Mog) and reinforce the fact that Mog does rhyme with the other examples from the '-og' family. However, I'd point out that Mog isn't actually a real word.

It's always important to focus on the purpose of a particular exercise. If this is an oral exercise, where a child is generating rhyming words, you can 'accept' non-words with just a comment along the lines of: "You're absolutely right, Mog does rhyme with dog. Let's see if we can find some other real words which rhyme."

However, if the learner is doing, say, the Wordbuilding exercise from the workbooks, it's different. For this activity, we're asking learners to blend a series of onsets with each rime and see how many real words they can find. In this exercise, we have a rule which says that you can't use names (otherwise they'll swear they have an uncle called Mog!) or words which you can't use in a sentence.



If you accept non-words in this exercise, you're letting them just write a whole series of letters without going through the process of sounding out the onset, blending it with the rime, and then deciding whether it's a real word.

For this exercise, the target number of words for each rime is not the actual number of real words which can be made. It's the number of words we would expect a learner at that level to be able to make.

Feel free to get in contact if you have comments or questions – your feedback is always welcome and we will endeavour to incorporate any important suggestions or questions into future webinars in this Series.