Improving Word Recognition Skills: What Works?

"The most important outcome of teaching word recognition," Dr. Swanson emphasizes, "is that students learn to recognize real words, not simply sound out 'nonsense' words using phonics skills."

What other terms might teachers or other professionals use to describe a child's problem with "word recognition"

- decoding
- phonics
- phonemic awareness
- word attack skills

Direct instruction appears the most effective approach for improving word recognition skills in students with learning disabilities. Direct instruction refers to teaching skills in an explicit, direct fashion. It involves drill/repetition/practice and can be delivered to one child or to a small group of students at the same time.

The three instruction components that proved most effective in increasing word recognition skills in students with learning disabilities are described below. Ideally, a reading program for word recognition will include all three components.

Increasing Word Recognition Skills in Students With LD

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instruction component</th>
<th>Program Activities and Techniques*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sequencing</strong></td>
<td>The teacher:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>• Breaks down the task (e.g., starts by having the child break an unknown word into separate sounds or parts they can sound out).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Gradually reduces prompts or cues.</td>
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<td>• Matches the difficulty level to the task and to the student.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Sequences short activities (e.g., first spends 10 minutes reviewing new words from a previous lesson, then 5 minutes underlining new words in the passage, and finally 5 minutes practicing blends).</td>
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<td></td>
<td>• Uses step-by-step prompts.</td>
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**Segmentation**  The teacher:
- Breaks down the targeted skill (e.g., identifying a speech or letter sound) into smaller units or component parts (e.g., sounding out each speech or letter sound in that word).

- Segments or synthesizes component parts (e.g., sounds out each phoneme in a word, then blends the sounds together).

Advanced organizers

The teacher:

- Directs children to look over material prior to instruction.
- Directs children to focus on particular information.
- Provides students with prior information about tasks.
- Tells students the objectives of instruction upfront.

* May be called "treatment description" in research studies.

**Improving reading comprehension skills: What works?**

The most effective approach to improving reading comprehension in students with learning disabilities appears to be a combination of direct instruction and strategy instruction. Strategy instruction means teaching students a plan (or strategy) to search for patterns in words and to identify key passages (paragraph or page) and the main idea in each. Once a student learns certain strategies, he can generalize them to other reading comprehension tasks. The instruction components found most effective for improving reading comprehension skills in students with LD are shown in the table below. Ideally, a program to improve reading comprehension should include all the components shown.

**Improving Reading Comprehension in Students With LD**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Instruction component</th>
<th>Program Activities and Techniques*</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Directed response/questioning</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>The teacher:</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>• Asks questions.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Directed response/questioning</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teacher and student(s):</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Encourages students to ask questions.</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Control difficulty of processing demands of task</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The teacher:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Provides assistance (as needed).</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
• Gives a simplified demonstration.

• Sequences tasks from easy to difficult.

• Presents easy steps or concepts first and moves on to progressively more difficult steps or concepts (a technique called task analysis).

• Allows student to control level of difficulty.

The activities:

• Are short.

The activities:

Elaboration

• Provide student with additional information or explanation about concepts, steps, or procedures.

• Use redundant text or repetition within text.

Modeling of steps by the teacher

Teacher demonstrates the processes and/or steps the students are to follow.

Group instruction

Instruction and/or verbal interaction takes place in a small group composed of students and teacher

The teacher:

• Reminds the student to use strategies or multiple steps.

• Explains steps or procedures for solving problems.

Strategy cues

The activities:

• Use "think aloud" models.

• List the benefits of strategy use or procedures.

* May be called "treatment description" in research studies.

Evaluating your child's reading program

Now you are well-equipped with research-based guidelines on the best teaching methods for kids with reading disabilities. These guidelines will serve you well even as new reading programs become available. To evaluate the reading program used in your child's classroom, follow these steps:
1. Ask for detailed literature on your child's reading program. Some schools voluntarily provide information about the reading programs they use. If they don't do this — or if you need more detail than what they provide — don't hesitate to request it from your child's teacher, special education teacher, resource specialist, or a school district administrator. In any school — whether public or private — it is your right to have access to such information.

2. Once you have literature on a specific reading program, locate the section(s) that describe its instruction components. Take note of where your child's reading program "matches" and where it "misses" the instruction components recommended in this article. To document what you find, you may find our worksheets helpful.
   - Reading Program Evaluation: Word Recognition
   - Reading Program Evaluation: Reading Comprehension

3. Find out if the instruction model your child's teacher uses is Direct Instruction, Strategy Instruction, or a combination approach. Some program literature states which approach a teacher should use; in other cases, it's up to the teacher to decide. Compare the approach used to what this article describes as being most effective for addressing your child's area of need.

4. Once you've evaluated your child's reading program, you may feel satisfied that her needs are being met. If not, schedule a conference with her teacher (or her IEP team, if she has one) to present your concerns and discuss alternative solutions.

Hope and hard work — not miracles

Finally, Dr. Swanson cautions, "There is no 'miracle cure' for reading disabilities. Even a reading program that has all the right elements requires both student and teacher to be persistent and work steadily toward reading proficiency."