

RESEARCH DIGEST



Development of an Evidence-based Reading Fluency Program for Adult Literacy Learners

By Shore, J., Sabatini, J., Lentini, J., Holtzman, S.,
& McNeil, A.

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Shore, Sabatini, Lentini, Holtzman, and McNeil (2015) report on the outcomes of an evidence-based Guided Repeated Reading (GRR) program for adults, one of three instructional approaches that were part of the Relative Effectiveness of Adult Literacy (REAL), a project exploring the efficacy of adult reading interventions. Noting the dearth of research related to fluency instruction and adult learners, the authors specifically investigated the effects of fluency training on adult literacy learners, positing fluency instruction as an essential element of teaching students to read and a critical component for increasing student literacy. We approached our reading of this article from both researcher and practitioner perspectives, noting particularly what practical elements the creators of a fluency-based program like GRR would need to take into account to make it possible for it to be implemented in the field. In doing so, we also provide a list of some fluency strategies that have been proven to be beneficial in K-12 classrooms and we believe may be effective with adult literacy learners.

Background to Study

According to the authors, there were four prominent features of the GRR pilot program: (1) program placement, (2) fluency materials for adults, (3) performance measures, and (4) tutor training and support. Students were placed in a class based on their Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT-3) score: Level A included students scoring at grade level 3.9 or below and Level B included students scoring between grade levels

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4.0–7.0. Program materials included reading passages thought to be of high interest to adults at four different skill levels. Ongoing performance measures were in place so that as part of regular instructional practice students were scored on reading speed and accuracy. Finally, throughout the program, there were tutor training sessions and workshops “supplemented by videos of expert-delivered instructional sessions and practice activities” (Shore et al., 2015, p. 93).

Reading, vocabulary and comprehension were described by the researchers as the three component areas of fluency instruction; therefore, the GRR program provided instruction in each of these areas (50% reading, 40% vocabulary, 10% comprehension). Reading instruction included modeling by the tutor as well as an embedded phonics approach to decoding. Comprehension and vocabulary seemed to have been addressed simultaneously with learners keeping notebooks that included challenging words and questions related to the readings.

Research Methods

While the authors do not clearly state their research design, they did discuss their participants and methods used to collect data in this study. Participants included 50 volunteers between the ages of 18 and 72. In order to be eligible to take part in the study, participants had to be attending adult literacy classes in urban areas on the east coast of the United States, have word recognition skills at the 7th grade level or below as measured by the WRAT-3, be proficient in English, and have no physical, behavioral or emotional challenges that might prevent them from fully participating. There were a total of 14 tutors who participated in the study, but little is mentioned about their backgrounds prior to participation.

Standardized test data as well as participant interview data were collected. It is not clear exactly how long the study lasted, but what the authors do tell us is that each of the 50 participants completed at least 30 hours of instruction, which included thirty 75-minute GRR sessions with approximately two to three sessions per week. Test data were collected regularly, followed by an interview with each participant regarding their study habits and perceptions of learning and reading.

The researchers administered the Woodcock-Johnson III Tests of Achievement, Broad Reading Cluster and Basic Reading Cluster to measure letter-word identification, passage comprehension, and reading fluency as well as the Test of Silent Word Reading Efficiency to measure sight word and phonemic decoding efficiency. The interviews conducted sought to collect basic demographic information from participants as well as information

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regarding their previous educational experiences and their reasons for taking adult literacy classes. The interviews also focused on reading practice and the participants' perceptions of their abilities.

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was used to analyze the standardized test data and evaluate the effects of GRR pilot program though no form of analysis was reported for the qualitative data collected through interviews. Findings showed that GRR had a noticeably large effect on fluency skills, which the authors posited, "stands to reason as the program is fluency based" (Shore et al., 2015, p. 95). In addition to fluency, GRR findings pointed to improvements in participants' comprehension and basic reading skills. However, the authors did state that because the participants were also co-enrolled in a separate adult literacy program, it was difficult to discern whether the gains were related to GRR interventions or those of the other program.

Practical Concerns

There are two major practical concerns that stand out to us in Shore et al.'s (2015) research including the type of placement testing used and the cost of implementation of a fluency based program like GRR. Our first concern is placement testing. The authors report that "each student's score on the their Wide Range Achievement Test (WRAT-3) was used as an initial placement indicator" (Shore et al., 2015, p. 89). We were surprised by this because the National Reporting System (NRS) requires that programs receiving federal funding use one of four tests for Adult Basic Education (ABE) placement: (1) Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE Test), (2) Massachusetts Adult Proficiency Tests (MAPT), (3) Wonderlic General Assessment of Instructional Needs (Wonderlic GAIN), or (4) Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) (Division of Adult Education & Literacy, 2015). It is difficult to imagine how other programs can be expected to appreciate GRR program implementation when a placement test, outside the group of tests accepted by the NRS, was chosen without explanation and the grade equivalencies reported were done so without offering practitioners a better way to frame those equivalencies with tests with which they might be more familiar.

Our second concern relates to cost of implementation of fluency-based programs like GRR. The creators of GRR stated that it was a pilot project; therefore, not suggesting it was ready for broad-scale implementation in ABE classrooms. As a result, this study does not give practitioners or administrators of ABE programs much to take away other than the idea that tutoring focused on fluency has the potential to show gains in "reading fluency and related reading skills for readers whose basic word reading skills were initially at the low-intermediate level" (Shore et al., 2015, p. 98). As a field, this is simply the

beginning of our exploration. If a program wanted to have a greater focus on fluency, GRR is too resource-intensive to implement effectively in a real-world ABE classroom, and it would be irresponsible to attempt implementation of a program that utilized less resources until studies have been done to see if those kinds of programs can be effective.

More specifically, the cost of implementing a program like GRR is not practical. If a GRR program does provide the gains the researchers claim, we still believe it would be too financially burdensome for the majority of adult literacy programs. In order to implement GRR, an ABE program would need access to multiple assessment instruments; program-specific readings; large numbers of tutors for one-on-one instruction and diagnosis (14 tutors for 50 students, 1:3.5 teacher-student ratio); extensive training (22 hours) which included video, audio, and mock tutorial sessions; and 30 lessons that each last for 75 minutes. And, there are still many unanswered questions about the tutors involved in a GRR program. For example, were they volunteer tutors or paid tutors? Many non-profits struggle for funding and staff. Any program that necessitates one-on-one in depth intervention is unfortunately too costly to implement—just paying that many tutors would be prohibitive, let alone training them in that much depth. Simply implementing GRR or any similar fluency-based program would likely be impossible for an ABE program because of budget and staffing restraints, and it would leave little time for any other kind of literacy instruction. The authors indicated they hoped to conduct future research to see if GRR could be operational in a small group context, which would be a useful step forward.

Effective Fluency Interventions

Overall, we like what the researchers are trying to do with GRR, and we think the self-reports of the students are promising. However, we suspect any program working so closely with individual students would see similar motivational and self-efficacy gains, as individual attention can do a lot for a student. We appreciate that the researchers admit there was a lack of follow-up in their study to see what the effects of this program were long-term, and we advise against implementation for something this labor-intensive until it has been proven to have long-lasting effects.

While there is still more research needed before we can confirm fluency training has an effect on adult literacy levels, if adult literacy practitioners are interested in incorporating fluency activities into their curriculum, below are fluency strategies that have been proven to be effective in K-12 settings that we suggest trying in adult education classrooms. While these fluency strategies are worth trying, we recommended them with caution and acknowledgement

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We recommended [these strategies] with caution, as research findings developed with children in traditional school settings do not always translate to adults.

- Include repeated reading in the classroom: a student rereads a text aloud until s/he can read it with little difficulty (Armbruster, Lehr, & Osborn, 2003).
- Vary texts: have students read aloud a variety of texts, but still read them repeatedly (Rasinski, 2012).
- Model fluent reading with a focus on prosody: model how vocal emphasis in reading a sentence aloud changes meaning and have students practice. This can also be done through performance such as reader's theater (Armbruster et al., 2003; Rasinski, 2012).
- Use short pieces that do not cause students to focus primarily on recognizing and decoding words (Armbruster et al., 2003).
- Engage in paired reading: in pairs, students read sections of a text out loud to each other. They give each other feedback on their reading. Students reread the text until they (and the teacher) feel they are reading it well. (Teachers float around the classroom, assisting with vocabulary and prompting students to decode difficult words. Teachers also assess appropriateness of text difficulty.) (Armbruster et al., 2003; Shanahan, 2012).
- Utilize choral reading: everyone in the classroom reads aloud as a group along with the teacher. The text should be at a good reading level for most of the students in the class. (Armbruster et al., 2003).
- Encourage students to read along to an audiobook—this can be done at home (Armbruster et al., 2003).

Be aware:

- Avoid round robin reading: Students each read for such a short amount of time that little benefit can be garnered (Shanahan, 2012).
- Do not focus only on speed: the goal is to also increase comprehension and develop recognition of punctuation (Rasinski, 2012).
- Silent reading has not been shown to increase fluency (Armbruster et al., 2003).
- Fluency should also be assessed; do not include it in your course if you are not going to include purposeful, consistent challenge (Armbruster et al., 2003; Rasinski, 2012; Shanahan, 2012).

In closing, it is admirable that the authors are trying to highlight reading fluency in the adult population, and this study brings attention to the potential gains that can be made by shifting our collective focus to include more fluency activities. However, we believe more research is needed to confirm that

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fluency is a major area to which we, as a field, need to give more attention, and more innovation is needed to create programs that will be effective and realistically implemented in the classroom.

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