



Video

FULL DETAILS AND TRANSCRIPT

Implementing Reading Interventions

Sylvia Linan-Thompson, Ph.D. • April 2007

Topic: Response to Intervention in Primary Grade Reading
Practice: Systematic Skill Instruction

Highlights (short version)

- Definition of reading interventions and characteristics of effective interventions
- Description on how to form groups for reading interventions: by reading skills level, not English language proficiency level
- Description provided of the time required for interventions across grade levels: how much time per week, day, and the duration of the intervention
- Interventionist needs to be well versed in reading instruction
- Training for interventionists should be included in the school's professional development plan

Highlights (extended version)

- Definition of reading interventions: comprehensive to cover all reading skill areas appropriate to age of child; groups of three to five children at same reading skill level
- Description of the time required for interventions across grade levels: how many times per week, how much time per session, and the duration of the intervention
- Factors beyond reading skills to consider in providing interventions to English learners

- Explanation of three types of expertise interventionists must have: (1) understanding of the components of reading and how to scaffold student skills; (2) ability to deliver instruction effectively; and (3) understanding of how to build oral language skills as reading skills are developed

About the Interviewee

Sylvia Linan-Thompson, Ph.D. is an associate professor in the Department of Special Education, a fellow in the Mollie V. Davis Professorship in Learning Disabilities, director of the Vaughn Gross Center for Reading and Language Arts, and associate director and co-principal investigator of the Research and Development Center for English Language Learners. She is the author of books, book chapters, and articles on topics related to interventions for students with reading difficulties, reading instruction for English language learners, response to instruction, and Spanish literacy instruction.

Full Transcript (short version)

A reading intervention program is part of an overall reading program in any given school. So, the core of all reading instruction in an elementary school is the core reading program. So that is the reading program that all the students in any classroom get, kindergarten through sixth grade.

Now, what we've learned is that not all students will make the kinds of gains that they need, just with that core reading program. Those students that can't make gains need additional instruction, and that additional instruction is provided by a reading intervention. This is additional supplemental instruction to the core.

How it differs from the core is that it is more systematic, it is more explicit, it's usually provided in smaller group sizes. So, instead of being provided to the whole class, it might be provided to a small group of children, say, three to five children at a time.

It really focuses on those elements of reading that we know are critical for acquiring reading skills. And so, it is not as broad, maybe, as the core reading program. It is more focused.

We know from the research that effective interventions have several components. One of the first things to think about is the content. The content is going to vary a little by the age of the children. But, in general, we want to make sure that we are including all five of the main components of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency building, vocabulary development, and the development of comprehension skills. The phonemic awareness is the one that will fall off early on because it's a very early skill, as with phonics, students will soon acquire those skills. We know that interventions that are comprehensive in the sense that they cover or include all five components are more effective than those interventions that focus on only one or two. Having a comprehensive intervention would be one of the factors to consider.

The second thing to consider, once students have been identified for an intervention, is to think about how you're going to group them. We know again from the research that the most effective groups for this kind of intervention are groups of one adult, a teacher interventionist, with three to five children; and that the best way to group those children is by skill level. So if you have situations where you have both English language learners and English monolingual speakers, the variable or factor you want to use to group students is their skill level on these measures that you have used to determine who needs additional instruction, rather than separating English language learners from English monolingual learners. The other reason that is good practice is that we have learned from previous studies that the English language learners actually benefit from having peers that serve as language models in these interventions. Again, the reason you focus on skill, rather than language, is that the intervention will be much more effective if the kids are homogeneous in terms of skill so that the teacher can really target the instructional components.

In thinking about how much time to allocate to reading interventions, there are three factors that you need to consider. One is how often a week. Daily is the most effective. How much time per day will vary by the age of the student. So the younger the student, the less time. For example, 15-20 minutes for kindergarteners, up to 50 minutes for second or third graders, and first graders about 30 minutes. Finally, how much duration for the intervention: how long to give it over a semester or over a year. The answer to that is eight to ten weeks in terms of duration, and at that point, you would want to assess the students again to determine whether or not they still need intervention.

Any staff at the school that is trained to provide reading interventions can provide intervention to English language learners. In thinking about reading interventions, the key is that the person providing it—the interventionist, the tutor, whoever it is that's providing it—is well versed in reading instruction. The kinds of scaffolds that English language learners need can be easily incorporated by anybody that is trained in providing an intervention. In fact, many of those scaffolds, such as the modeling and the explicit language, are usually part of any well-designed intervention.

Full Transcript (extended version)

Any staff at the school that is trained to provide reading interventions can provide intervention to English language learners. In thinking about reading interventions the key is that the person providing it—the interventionist, the tutor, whoever it is that's providing it—is well versed in reading instruction. The kinds of scaffolds that English language learners need can be easily incorporated by anybody that is trained in providing an intervention and, in fact, many of those scaffolds such as the modeling, the explicit language are usually part of any well-designed intervention. We know from the research that effective interventions have several components. One of the first things to think about is the content. The content, again, is going to vary a little by the age of the children. But, in general, we want to make sure that we're including all five of the main components of reading: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency building, vocabulary development, and the development of comprehension skills. The phonemic awareness is the one that will fall off early on because it's a very early skill, as will phonics as Students will acquire those skills. We know that interventions that

are comprehensive in the sense that they cover or include all five components are more effective than those interventions that focus on only one or two. And so having a comprehensive intervention with depth would be one of the factors to consider.

The second thing to consider once students have been identified for an intervention is to think about how you're going to group them. We know again from the research that the most effective groups for this kind of intervention are groups of one adult—a teacher, interventionist—and three to five children; and the best way to group those children is by skill level. So when you have situations where you have both English language learners and English monolingual speakers, the variable or the factor that you want to use to group students is their skill level on these measures that you have used to determine who needs additional instruction, rather than separating English language learners from English monolingual learners. The other reason that is good practice is because we have learned from previous studies that English language learners actually benefit from having peers that serve as language models in these interventions. But again, the reason to focus on skill rather than language is that the intervention will be much more effective if the kids are homogeneous in terms of skill so that the teacher can really target the instructional components.

In thinking about how much time to allocate to reading interventions there are three factors that you need to consider. One is how often in a week, and daily is the most effective. How much time per day will vary by the age of the student, so the younger the student the less time. For example, 15 to 20 minutes for kindergartners, up to 50 minutes for second to third graders, first graders about 30 minutes. Finally, how much the duration of the intervention should be: how long to give it over a semester or over a year. The answer to that is eight to ten weeks in terms of duration, and at that point you would want to assess the students again to determine whether or not they still need intervention.

One of the things we know about reading interventions is that they can also help English language learners develop their oracy, or oral language skills, as they are developing their reading skills. One of the reasons for this is that again it's very structured; they are getting a lot of opportunity to engage with text. And particularly as students get older they're getting many more opportunities to read text with corrective feedback than they would in a large group situation. The other benefit from just having these opportunities to read is that we know that all of us, regardless of who we are, learn the majority of our vocabulary through reading, and so by having these additional opportunities to engage with text they are being exposed to more vocabulary.

Now we also know that just that intervention alone, while giving more exposure, may not be enough for them to really develop their oral language skills. One of the things that you want to be sure to include in an intervention that has English language learners is to make sure that you are defining a lot of the vocabulary, not only in the text that they are reading, but that you're using in the instruction. The other thing you can do is to add additional reading time, for example, interventions that focus on those skills, but then add a story retell or additional reading time that really focuses on vocabulary building and comprehension building in which the students are actually using language. Those kinds of opportunities also help students develop oral language proficiency.

There are three things that teachers can do that we have found to be very beneficial. The first one is to model everything we want the students to do, all the tasks that we're going to ask them to complete, so that way they know exactly what it is we want them to do. The second is to clarify all the vocabulary—not all the vocabulary, but the target vocabulary we are using.

One of the things we don't want is for the students to be completing these activities in the abstract—so there are just sounds they are hearing and not really understanding. Even when you are having them read word lists or using a word list to have them complete a phonemic awareness test, one of the things you would want to do is to very quickly ensure that they know the meaning of all those words. While you wouldn't go in to an in-depth definition of what these words are, you might show a picture or do a quick demonstration again so students have some context for the activities they are doing and so the words aren't just meaningless sounds that they are working with.

When schools are considering who would benefit from interventions, in addition to the need that is determined by the assessments that they give to all students, the other factors that they need to consider with their English language learners are factors such as the students' literacy skills in their native language and how long they've been in the country. So, for example, there might be some cases in which children first come to the United States as fourth graders and have had interrupted education in their native language and don't have strong literacy skills even in their first language. Those children will require slightly different instruction than students who are literate in a first language and only have to learn how to apply those reading skills they already possess to English. Students that are literate will have to learn English vocabulary, they'll have to learn the letter sound correspondents in English, but they already know how to read. They can already decode, they probably already have some comprehension strategies, as opposed to children who are not literate in their native language and who would need to learn how to read even as they are learning English.

Any staff at the school that is trained to provide reading interventions can provide intervention to English language learners. In thinking about reading interventions the key is that the person providing it—the interventionist, the tutor, whoever it is that is providing it—is well versed in reading instruction. The kinds of scaffolds that English language learners need can be easily incorporated by anybody that is trained in providing an intervention and, in fact, many of those scaffolds such as the modeling, the explicit language, are usually part of any well-designed intervention.

The teachers that provide this intensive reading instruction to students will need additional professional development in several areas. The first is reading instruction. Not only do they need to understand these components of reading, but they'll need to understand them to a level where they can scaffold students. What I mean by that is, if a student has difficulty completing a task, a teacher needs to understand how to step back half a step to scaffold that student so that they're able to complete it. So, for example, if you ask a student to segment a word and they're not able to do it, the teacher needs to be able to, on the spot, know how to support that. That might be by giving the child a simple clue like telling her there are three sounds so the student knows that she is going to try to listen for three sounds, or to give the student a manipulative that she can use to help her say the sounds, or stretching the word. So there are different ways that they can scaffold and that's

something that you don't just know. Training and understanding reading well enough to provide those kinds of support would be one thing.

The other thing they need to learn, which is also something that's not very natural, is how to deliver the instruction effectively. How to use explicit language and so use only the number of words needed. As teachers, sometimes we like to talk a lot, to say a lot of things and, for all of these children and also to make the best use of time, it's best if you just say what you need to say, be explicit in what you are asking the students to do.

Another part of instructional delivery is how to model effectively so that students know exactly what they need to do. So those are just two of the delivery factors that they need to consider; the third that's very important is pacing. When you only have 30 minutes to catch students up for half a year or a year that they are behind, you need to make effective use of the time that you have and pacing becomes very important, so the instruction moves at a very fast pace. These are all things or factors that teachers need to learn to do to provide effective instruction.

In addition to understanding the components of reading, in addition to understanding these features of effective instruction, if you're going to work with English language learners, you need to become attuned to the kind of vocabulary that you're going to encounter—that they might need some clarification on and some scaffolding on. So, for example, sometimes simple directions that you might use in reading instructions such as “we're going to stretch a word,” the word “stretch” might not be familiar to an English language learner. So you figure out that might be a word you need to explain, or you make sure that they understand the words that you're using in an activity, so they have a context in which they are working in. In addition to those instructional uses of language, another thing would be to really just build on other aspects of languages they encounter. For example, you might one day be reading a story where you are reading about a camp where it's used as a noun, you know, “the children went to a camp.” In another story you might use the word “camp” again but this time it's the verb, so pointing out those kinds of grammatical features of language, making that explicit, you know, “sometimes it's a noun, we've learned this word, the last time it was a place you go to, now we're going to talk about it as something you do,” and so kind of looking for those opportunities to help children build their knowledge of English even as they are building their reading skills.

So those would be the three areas that you would want to make sure teachers have professional development in. The reading components (and really understanding those), the features of effective instruction in terms of the delivery, and the ways to scaffold English language learners so that they can also develop their oral skills as they are developing reading.

Finding the time to provide this additional instruction can be a challenge for many schools, in particular administrators, because the day's already full and everything that we do in schools is important. In trying to decide what will be supplanted by this additional instruction, there are certain things to consider. The first is, what are the critical needs of the students? And learning to read is by far one of the most important things that children need to learn in school—if they don't know how to read well they can't benefit from the instruction in any of the other content areas.

The second thing is, that we know from experience and from research that many children who receive this early intervention—early, as in kindergarten and first grade—actually after one semester, sometimes two, catch up with their peers and no longer need intervention and, in addition, have the skills they need to benefit from the other instruction.

To summarize, administrators need to weigh the relative benefit of providing this reading intervention versus what other kinds of content students might miss. So in thinking about how to allocate time, how to schedule students' time, they need to realize that these relatively short interventions have long-term impacts for students in that many will acquire the reading skills they need to benefit from all their other instruction. In planning schedules, they should think about those content areas that may not be as impactful at this point in time in consideration of the benefits of the reading skills that the students will acquire.