CREATING CONFIDENT READERS AND WRITERS IN THE SPECIAL EDUCATION CLASSROOM

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Abstract
Given the unilateral push towards deploying the Science of Reading in the K-12 classroom, understanding the benefits of programs like Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS) can help educators make decisions about how they can best support all types of learners. This reflective essay reports on interventions used with two high school seniors receiving special education services. It explains how LETRS principles were applied in the classroom to address decoding, morphology, vocabulary, comprehension, and composition deficits. It documents instructional adjustments, challenges, successes, and future instructional plans, and argues for the value of structured literacy and morphology-focused vocabulary study in the secondary special education classroom.

Keywords: structured literacy, Science of Reading, reading intervention, special education, LETRS

Introduction

With literacy rates declining over the past several decades (Harris, 2025), America finds itself in a concerning position. Rapid advances in technology and media dissemination require citizens to be savvier than ever when it comes to reading and comprehending the information that flows ceaselessly; what once came in trickles now comes in overwhelming deluges. Yet, many modern students continue to fall behind on the literacy front, at risk of becoming disengaged in learning and more prone to leading a life of underperformance. Such students will be "disadvantaged in twenty-first-century society," as careers demand more competencies associated with advanced literacy skills, such as critical thinking, high-level analysis, and composition (Moats & Tolman, 2019, p. 4). To assist students in developing these necessary skills, educators can turn to intensive reading courses such as Language Essentials for Teachers of Reading and Spelling (LETRS), developed by Louisa Moats and Carol Tolman, to learn more about how students learn to read, the barriers students face when encountering reading, and how to implement strategies that will help struggling students find literacy success.

Reading and writing are foundational academic skills that contribute to academic success, civic engagement, and sustainable lifelong learning. To fully engage in the secondary curriculum, these skills must be automatic; however, this automaticity is often erroneously assumed by teachers. Many students arrive in high school lacking mastery of these literacy foundations, which causes them to fall behind their peers and disengage from the academic process. For these students, strategic and proven strategies are required to help them make meaningful steps towards mastery and ultimately gain fluency in their comprehension and writing.

Student Profiles and Initial Assessments

I worked with two high school students, whom I will refer to as Eli and Martin. Both were seniors receiving special education services for reading and written language. Eli, 18, was diagnosed with dyslexia at age nine, but moved schools frequently during his elementary years and never received consistent interventions. He demonstrated strong oral language and critical thinking skills. Eli revealed in an initial interview that he had not received much formal instruction on composition, instead focusing solely on foundational skills. He had also never engaged in deep word studies (morphologies, etymologies, etc.). He excelled at discourse and forming complex thoughts when instruction was delivered verbally; however, he struggled to decode multisyllabic words. Assessment of his writing revealed a gap in his phoneme-grapheme correspondence, typical of students with dyslexia (Moats & Tolman, 2019, p. 55).

Martin, 18, lacked many foundational reading skills, which aligned with his specific learning disability in the area of processing speed. His reading fluency hovered around the late 4th/early 5th grade level, and he struggled to store and retrieve information from longer, more complex texts. He excelled at decoding sight words but struggled with unfamiliar multisyllabic words. His spelling also revealed a misunderstanding of phonemes, as we often attempted to spell out words with little success (e.g *favret* for *favorite*). Martin noted that he had not been expected to write anything over a page until his sophomore year of high school. He had also never internalized the benefits of learning the roots and origins of words to assist with conjunctions and spelling.

Despite the two students differing in their abilities and needs, they both lacked consistent reading and writing instruction throughout their elementary and middle-grade years. Completing LETRS and the Bridge to Practice activities helped me see that these areas are not a collection of disparate skills, but rather a cohesive set of masteries that come together to allow students to comprehend and compose competently. Additionally, utilizing the specific tools presented in the unit allowed me to better speak with parents, guardians, and general education teachers about how to better accommodate and intervene with students in the classroom. Practice and application of the principles allowed me to see success in all my students, regardless of their abilities.

Applying LETRS Principles

I decided the best approach for Eli would be to focus on explicit instruction in syllable types, syllable division, and morphology. This is done using a multi-sensory approach, borrowed from some leftover materials I found in a discarded *Take Flight* toolkit in my classroom closet. We spent the first few sessions getting familiar with how each letter sounds in our mouths, looking at printouts, and using a mirror so Eli could see how his tongue moved in his mouth. We practiced dividing some of the Tier 2 vocabulary from his government class—pulling double-duty as a study aid—to see how the parts of each word fit together. Eli also helped me create some morphology games that we played with the rest of my English class.

Martin's needs led me to believe that he would benefit from targeted instruction on phoneme-grapheme mapping and CVC/CVCE (Consonant-Vowel-Consonant / Consonant-Vowel-Consonant-e) patterns. He had an interest in the etymology of words after we related it to his love of Greek mythology, so finding ways to break apart multisyllabic words into their roots was helpful. Daily practice with morphing words and manipulating blends became part of the two hours I had with Martin.

I used to rely on traditional vocabulary exercises: weekly word lists, context clues, and periodic quizzes. Entering the special education classroom, I found that these types of activities were not effective for students like Eli and Martin. Instead, it was a more beneficial approach to vocabulary in the classroom by focusing on depth instead of breadth. By far, the most beneficial strategy for both Eli and Martin was focusing on morphological mapping and semantic networks.

For example, words like *intervene* would be broken into their prefix and root to show the meaningful units of the word. Martin, in particular, loved to come up with long lists of related words (intercept, interfere, etc.). Eli's preferred activity was creating word webs to make correlations between meaning and usage. I used an online vocabulary program called Membean, which featured a similar activity called a word constellation that also piqued his interest. He had extensive background knowledge compared to his peers, which allowed him to generate detailed maps with ease. Eli, whose IEP goal entailed spelling and decoding, became more confident in breaking down and manipulating new words.

In their general education classrooms, both students benefited from cloze sentences and evidence-based writing strategies such as sentence scrambles and kernel sentence expansion. I also pre-taught Tier 2 words from their classes to ensure that they had mastered the words' meanings before encountering them in the context of the curriculum. Ultimately, exposure to words in multiple settings across multiple class periods became the most effective means of helping Eli and Martin gain confidence in their comprehension and composition.

Instructional Adjustments and Challenges During LETRS Implementation

Implementing LETRS in the classroom was difficult for me at first. Initially, I felt overwhelmed by the concepts and terminology that I needed to learn, but when I chunked what I learned into more manageable tools, I started to see some success. By doing short, targeted lessons with my students, I was better able to balance things like planning, grading, and data collection during my workday.

After completing LETRS Volume 1, I discovered how important it is to integrate phonics and morphology instruction into my daily routine. When I introduce vocabulary or answer questions about unfamiliar words for students, these two areas have become a part of my toolbox. I learned how important it is to equip students with an understanding of word families and origins, as well as ensuring that they know how a word's phonemes relate to its encoding. Ultimately, I feel more confident teaching students reading now that I have a deeper understanding of models like the Four-Part Processing Model. With that, I am better able to talk to students, parents, and colleagues about students' needs and how they can be best met.

Martin was also more hesitant than Eli to engage with the interventions. I believe trying new strategies with students who have been identified and received pull-out services for many years can sometimes be met with trepidation. Eli responded to the beginning of the interventions with resistance, noting that it felt like yet another attempt to make him a better reader. I was able to leverage our relationship and the trust I had built with him to help him find some confidence in the system, but I can see how other students his age might meet the program with similar hesitance.

The comprehension problems that both Eli and Martin exhibited were masking deeper foundational deficits with their decoding, encoding, and language skills. Eli has strong oral language skills but struggles to engage with text. Martin had a robust but shallow mental model, making it difficult for him to make inferences and summarize new ideas. I struggled with both students because I was unsure about what to tackle to help navigate their barriers with reading comprehension and composition.

Completing LETRS Unit 6, which focuses on reading comprehension, helped me realize that both students needed to see a clear and digestible model of the reading process. I believe showing them the correlation between word recognition and reading comprehension helped them to develop the buy-in needed to start making meaningful progress. Coming from a general education background, I erroneously assumed that students would have all the necessary tools and understanding to fill their gaps, but I quickly realized that students like Eli and Martin need a clear picture of how their brains take in information and process it for understanding.

One of my most effective tools was incorporating more think-alouds in my lessons. I would try to verbalize what I was visualizing in new ways not present in the text, pause and reflect on confusing passages, or talk about why I thought an author might choose to use one word over another. Martin quickly glommed onto thinking aloud, often volunteering his thoughts when we read together as a class. Eli benefited most from hearing me talk through things like text structures, story grammar, and literary devices, as these sequences and figurative parts of language often confused him when reading independently.

Successes and Future Instruction

Eli's confidence was noticeably higher, especially after a few months of work. I worked with him for two years prior, and this was the first time I had him volunteer to attempt reading aloud in our pull-out class. His decoding ability moved from sight words to tackling multisyllabic words that he was familiar with. This was especially evident with the academic vocabulary that he has extra practice with. Martin's work on CVCe words showed the most improvement, and he was thrilled when he encountered these words and read them with confidence. He also liked helping his classmates break down words, and I had plenty of chances to let him teach the class a small lesson from time to time.

One of the biggest successes for me—which ties perfectly into my future instruction—was my focus on planning. The appendix became a go-to place for me to find targeted resources not only for my case study students, but all the students on my caseload. I was quick to meet with other departments in school to share ways to aid students in composition, which I believe was met with genuine gratitude. My school has 50-minute class periods, which can make it difficult to integrate deep, meaningful comprehension and composition instruction, so simple strategies with big impact are the most effective.

Now that I have finished LETRS training, I feel more confident looking at students' need areas, identifying them, and making a solid plan that I can implement with the support of their parents/guardians and teachers. Graphics like Scarborough's Reading Rope and the Simple View of Reading are now permanently in my IEP folder for meetings. I plan to spend the summer retooling my materials to ensure that I am focusing on morphology and advanced word study throughout. I mostly work with older students, so ensuring that I have access to an abundance of high-interest decodable texts is paramount. I want to intentionally focus on what students need to develop the strategies or automaticity they need to read fluently and confidently.

Moving forward, I will continue focusing on structured writing, vocabulary, and comprehension instruction. I will continue to focus on helping students create rich mental models and schemas that will help them feel less frustrated when approaching reading and writing across disciplines. As a special education teacher, I must advocate for structured literacy instruction in the secondary environment. The second volume of LETRS helped me to understand the importance of utilizing models and language systems, all of which are beneficial for older students to take ownership of their learning.

References

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