

**EEIA 2018**  
**International Conference "Education Environment for the  
Information Age"**

**READING INSTRUCTION FOR STUDENTS WITH  
INTELLECTUAL DISABILITIES**

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*Abstract*

Students with intellectual disabilities can learn to read. There are three basic approaches to reading instruction with this population: (a) a sight word approach, (b) a phonics or skills-based approach, and (c) a comprehensive approach. Of these, only the comprehensive approach will enable students to achieve their full literacy potential. This article describes a comprehensive, meaning-based approach. The meaning-based approach is based on a neurocognitive model of reading. This model describes reading as a process of creating meaning with print in which the brain uses three cueing systems to recognize words (phonological, semantic, and syntactic). Reading instruction for students should be balanced and comprehensive, using authentic or connected text to emphasize reading as a meaning-making endeavor. This is not a program or method; rather, a set of research-based strategies designed to develop all three of the brain's cueing systems. The author describes six different types of strategies used with this approach: (a) writing, (b) word work, (c) cloze and maze, (d) fluency activities, (e) comprehension, and (f) self-selected reading practice. Teachers are encouraged to adopt and adapt based on the needs of their students; however, it is recommended that strategies from all six categories be used for daily reading instruction

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**Keywords:** Intellectual disabilities, developmental disabilities, neurocognitive, cueing systems.



## **1. Introduction**

It was once thought that students with intellectual disabilities were not capable of learning to read (Erickson, 2006). As such, they were provided little or no reading instruction and had few opportunities to engage in authentic literacy activities (Coyne, Pish, Dalton, Zeph, & Smith, 2012; Katims, 2000). The reading instruction that did occur, was not very effective. It should not be surprising then to discover that today, many adults with intellectual disabilities are illiterate or under-literate (below their capabilities). This severely impacts their employment opportunities as well as their ability to participate fully in society (Browder, Wakeman, Spooner, Ahlgrim-Delzell, & Algozinne, 2006; Erickson, 2006). This article describes an effective, research-based approach to reading instruction for students with intellectual disabilities that is based on the neurocognitive model of reading.

## **2. Problem Statement**

### **2.1. Approaches to Reading Instruction**

#### **2.1.1. Sight Word Instruction**

In the past, most reading instruction for students with intellectual disabilities consisted primarily of sight word instruction (Browder, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Courtake, Gibbs, & Flowers, 2008; Katims, 2000; Hill 2016; Hudson & Test, 2011). Sight word instruction in this context consisted of asking students to memorize a set of functional (sometimes called survival) words, pictures, and symbols. These were words such as: danger, hot, exit, flammable, exit, boys, girls, poison, etc. However, there is very little (if any) empirical evidence supporting a purely sight-word approach to reading instruction for any population. Here, students do not learn to generalize or to identify new words beyond those memorized. Thus, sight word instruction should not be used for reading instruction for students with intellectual disabilities (Browder, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Courtake, Gibbs, & Flowers, 2008; Erickson, Hanser, Hatch, & Sanders, 2009; Fautsch-Patridge, McMaster, & Hupp, 2011; Schwarts, Hahs-Vaugh, & Nye, 2013).

#### **2.1.2. Phonics Instruction**

More recently, research has shown that students with intellectual disabilities benefit from phonics instruction (Allor, Mathes, Roberts, Cheatham & Al Otaiba, 2014; Alnahdi, 2015; Fautsch-Patridge, McMaster, & Hupp, 2011; Fredrick, Davis, Albert, & Waugh, 2013; Hill, 2016). That is, they can learn to generalize and apply these skills in other contexts in order to identify unknown words (Browder, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Courtake, Gibbs, & Flowers, 2008; Browder, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Flowers, & Baker, 2012; Erickson, Hanser, Hatch, & Sanders, 2009; Erickson & Koppenhaver, 1995; Scruggs, 2008). However, what often occurs in special education settings is that this becomes the primary focus (Hill, 2016; Katims, 2000). That is, reading instruction is reduced to drill and practice with a highly abstract set of reading subskills, taught using direct instruction, and decontextualized from any real meaning (Coyne, Pish, Dalton, Zeph, & Smith, 2012; Erickson, Hanser, Hatch, & Sanders, 2009; Hedrick, Katims, & Carr, 1999; Katims, 2000). Here there is little (if any) focus on creating meaning with print (comprehending). As well, students are rarely provided opportunities to do what is most important in becoming literate: read authentic text and write for real purposes (Allington, 2012; Pressley et al., 2001).

### **3. Research Questions**

While research has shown that phonics-based instruction can lead to increased scores on phonics-based measures (Allor, Mathes, Roberts, Cheatham, & Al Otaiba, 2014; Browder, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Flowers, & Baker, 2012; Fautsch-Patridge, McMaster, & Hupp, 2011; Fredrick, Davis, Albert, & Waugh, 2013, Hill, 2016); there is little evidence to demonstrate that this type instruction has any have long term effect on students' ability to create meaning with print (Allington, 2012; Johannessen & McCann, 2009; McCormick, 2007; Strauss, 2011). And with this approach to reading instruction, reading becomes an abstract and meaningless endeavor for a population that needs learning experiences to be concrete and immediate. Phonics instruction is necessary; however, it should not be the primary component of a reading program for students with intellectual disabilities (Erickson, Hanser, Hatch, & Sanders, 2009; McCormick & Zutell, 2011; NICHD, 2000). Instead, reading instruction should be balanced and comprehensive, using authentic or connected text to emphasize reading as a meaning-making endeavor (Coyne, Pish, Dalton, Zeph, & Smith, 2012; Erickson, 2006; Erickson & Koppenhaver, 1995; Hendrick, Katims, & Carr, 1999; Hudson & Test, 2011; Katims, 2000).

### **4. Purpose of the Study**

This article describes a comprehensive, meaning-based approach based on a neurocognitive model of reading and six types of strategies used for its implementation.

### **5. Research Methods**

The author uses text analysis and comparative analysis for the research.

### **6. Findings**

#### **6.1. A Comprehensive, Meaning-Based Approach**

The meaning-based approach recommended here is based on a neurocognitive model of reading. This model describes reading as a process of creating meaning with print in which the brain uses three cueing systems to recognize words (phonological, semantic, and syntactic) (Anderson, 2013; Hruby & Goswami, 2013; Johnson, 2016; Paulson & Freeman, 2003; Ruddell & Unrau, 2013; Straus, 2011; Weaver, 2009). It is not a program or method; rather, a set of research-based strategies designed to develop all three cueing systems. There are six different types of strategies used here: (a) writing, (b) word work, (c) cloze and maze, (d) fluency activities, (e) comprehension, and (f) self-selected reading practice. Teachers are encouraged to adopt and adapt based on the needs of their students; however, it is recommended that strategies from all six categories be used for daily reading instruction.

##### **6.1.1. Writing**

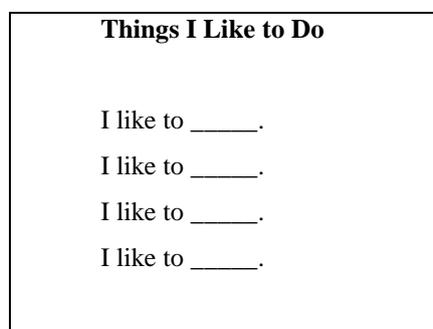
Writing. Every reading interventional session should include some form of writing activity (Johnson, 2017). Reading and writing strengthen each other (Duke, Pearson, Strachan, & Billman, 2011; Goodman, Fries, & Strauss, 2016; Lipson & Wixon, 2009; Parodi, 2013; Weaver, 2009). As well, writing is one of the

most effective strategies to use to develop the syntactic cueing system (Johnson, 2017). It also strengthens letter-sound relationships. Below are examples of the types of writing activities that could be used here.

- **Language experience activities (LEA).** Here students dictate three to five sentences to create a paragraph. The teacher writes what students say on a screen, board, poster, or paper. Then, students re-read the paragraph until fluency is achieved. Finally, the paragraph is used for an analytic phonics mini-lesson.

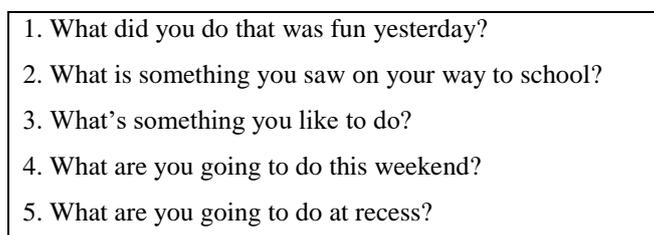
- **Sentence mix-up.** Students create meaning by reordering the words in a mixed-up sentence. Initial sentences can be taken from the LEA above, written on a strip of paper, with each individual word cut out. Sentences can also be taken from stories students are reading.

- **Predictable writing.** Three sentences are written with one word missing (see Figure 01). Working in small group, create a large poster and have each student fill in one line. Then students should re-read the sentences until fluency is achieved (Johnson, 2017).



**Figure 01.** Predictable writing.

- **One sentence.** It is easy for some students to become overwhelmed with the task of writing. With these students, it is often best to start by asking them to write a single sentence. If they are not used to writing, you may have to help them identify possible topics by asking questions such as those in Figure 02 (Johnson, 2017).



**Figure 02.** Questions to elicit one-sentence writing.

- **Syntax sentences.** Students are shown two to three sentence that contain syntax errors (grammar or word order). Read them aloud first, then ask students to make corrections. These sentences can be designed to reinforce target letters or letter patterns or to use as pre-reading and post-reading activities.

- **Sentence combing.** Ask students to combine two sentences while retaining the meaning of both.

- **Sentence alteration.** Students are given a sentence and asked to say the same thing using different words or a different word order (see Figure 03, (Johnson, 2017)).

Please fill my glass.  
Fill my glass please.  
Will you fill my glass?  
Can you fill my glass?  
Put more in my glass.  
My glass needs filling.  
You should fill my glass.

**Figure 03.** Sentence alteration.

• **Sentence elaboration.** Students are given a single sentence and asked to make it different or more interesting (see Figure 04).

The dog ran down the road.  
The big dog ran down the road.  
The big clown ran down the road.  
The big clown ran down the road and fell.  
The silly clown ran down the road and fell.  
The silly clown fell down.

**Figure 04.** Sentence elaboration.

The writing activities like sentence elaboration, alteration, and combining can be done orally or in writing. Again, since the focus is on grammar and word order, the teacher can use all the activities above to develop the syntactic cueing system (Johnson, 2017). They can also be used to reinforce letter sounds or patterns. These activities should be kept simple and brief.

### 6.1.2. Word Work

The goal of word work is to strengthen letter-sound relationships and enhance students' ability to see letter patterns (Cunningham & Cunningham, 2002; Erickson & Kopenhaver, 1995). Word work should be one part of any instructional program for reading (Johnson, 2017). It is recommended that these activities be based on common letter patterns or word families. Sometimes called large unit phonics or decoding by pattern, this focus helps to develop students' ability to identify words by analogy (Allington, 2002; Cunningham & Cunningham, 2002). Five types of activities are described here:

• **Word-building.** This is a large unit phonics activities that enhances students' ability to recognize letter patterns and word parts or phonograms. An initial letter sound and a word part or phonogram can be given to students. They are asked to put them together to create a word.

• **Word discrimination.** This activity allows students to develop their ability to recognize target letter patterns within words. Here, two words are presented, one of which has the target letter pattern. Teacher asks students to quickly point to and read the word that contains the target letter pattern.

• **Which word looks right?** Students are presented with two or three words that say the same thing phonetically, but only one of which is spelled correctly. Students are asked to identify the word that looks right (or correct). For example, students would be presented with the following spellings of the word ‘sail’ and asked which one looks right: sael – sail, or given the word ‘poke’ with the following choices: poce – poke -- poek.

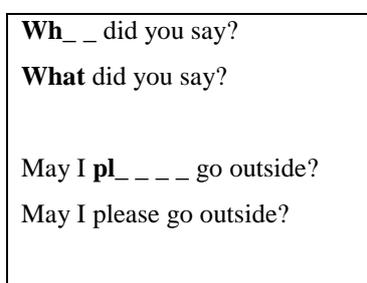
• **Sentence dictation.** The teacher or partner reads a simple sentence consisting of three to six words. The sentence should include at least one word with the target letter sound or pattern. Students write the sentence. After each sentence is written, students look for words that “do not look right” and underline them. Then the teacher shows students the complete sentence with correct spelling. They cross out the word and write the correct spelling on top. When the correct spellings are in place, students reread the sentence until fluency is achieved (Johnson, 2017).

• **Sentence replay** (replay analysis). From three to five sentences on a piece of paper are shown to students. Each sentence contains at least one word with the target letter sound or pattern being reinforced. Students read the sentences into an audio recorder, then, they listen to the recording and underline miscued or stumbled words. They review the words and repeat the process until fluency is achieved with no miscues or stumbles (Johnson, 2017).

### 6.1.3. Cloze and maze activities.

Cloze and maze activities are used to develop the semantic cueing system (Johnson, 2017; Paulson & Freeman, 2003). Expert readers use context (semantics), background knowledge (schemata), syntax, along with minimal letter clues to create meaning with print (Binder, Duffy, & Rayner, 2001; Goodman, Fries, & Strauss, 2016; Hruby & Goswami, 2013; Paulson & Freeman, 2003; Weaver, 2009). As well, cloze and maze (semantics-based activities) have been used to enhance students’ reading fluency (Berends & Reitsma, 2004).

• **Cloze.** Here, students read a sentence in which one word has just the beginning letter showing. They are asked to identify a word that makes sense within that sentence. The complete sentence is shown then to students and they are asked to re-read it until fluency is achieved (see Figure 05)



**Figure 05.** Examples of cloze activities used to reinforce target phonograms.

• **Maze.** Maze activities provide students sentences containing three words from which to choose, and only one of them makes the sentence meaningful. For both cloze and maze, students should be shown six to ten sentences during a single session. Sentences can be designed to reinforce a target letter sound or letter pattern; they can also be designed to be used as pre- or post-reading activities.

#### 6.1.4. Fluency Activities.

Being able to recognize words frees up space in short term memory for comprehension (Rasinski & Samuels, 2011). Repeated reading activities can be used as one of the methods toward this end (Kuhn & Stahl, 2013; Samuels, 2013). Through repeated practice with the same text, learners train to recognize words and process letter patterns quickly:

- **Words per half-minute (WPH).** Students read a piece of text according to their reading level as quickly as they can for a half minute (Johnson, 2017). This is done three times with the number of words read recorded after each attempt. The student should read and pronounce as many words as possible in one minute not concerning about comprehension here or the number of words identified correctly. There are other places to measure these. You are just concerned about speed. Finally, students record their three WPM scores on a line or bar graph.

- **Short Passage Fluency (SPF).** This is a repeated reading activity in which students should read a short passage of approximately 60 to 70 words. In each passage, the 30th, 40th, and 50th word is underlined or marked. They read the short passage three times and record their times on a line or bar graph. When students are able to read such part of the text at approximately 12 seconds, they move up to the next mark or reading level.

- **Scaffolded oral reading (ScORe).** Scaffolded oral reading (ScORe) is a technique similar to the neurological impress method (Flood, Lapp, & Fisher, 2005). Here the teacher and the student read the text aloud. Teacher's reading just a millisecond ahead of the student acts as a scaffold for a stable, comfortable rhythm. In case the student stops reading, the teacher goes on. The student rely on the teacher's voice to act as a scaffold during reading in the following way: the teacher should read the text in a low voice and provide sufficient structure to support the rhythm of reading. If the student seems to read fluently, the teacher can just pronounce the first sounds of some words or dropping out of others completely. This kind of activity can be used alone or in small groups.

#### 6.1.5. Cognitive Processes Related to Comprehension

Comprehension is thinking (Jennings, Caldwell, & Lerner, 2010; Paulson, Flurkey, Goodman, & Goodman, 2009). Some of the examples of the cognitive processes or operations used to comprehend are shown in Figure 06 (Johnson, 2017; Learned, Stockdill, & Moje, 2013; Lipson & Wixon, 2009, Tompkins, 2011; Brown, Palinscar, & Armbruster, 2013). Students' comprehension can be improved by improving the thinking that occurs during the process of reading (Almasi, et. al., 2011; Dole, Nokes, & Drits, 2009; Martin & Kuke, 2001). To do this, the teacher can apply the cognitive operations mentioned in Figure 6 to develop students' activities before, during and after reading. The goal is to teach students to employ cognitive operations automatically during reading. Below are examples of three thinking skills that can be used to develop cognitive processes that are relevant to effective comprehension (see Figure 06 (Johnson, 2017)).

1. compare	7. problem solve	13. predict
2. respond aesthetically	8. analyze	14. recognize story grammar
3. infer	9. evaluate	15. reflect: metacognition

4. identify important ideas or themes	10. make connections	16. visualize
5. identify supporting details	11. order	17. question
6. identify cause-effect relationships	12. inductive analysis	18. summarize

**Figure 06.** Cognitive operations used by effective readers.

• **Story grammar.** Narrative texts have similar structural elements including characters, setting, and events. Introducing some of the story grammar elements from the story as a pre-reading activity provides students with a scaffold or a sense of story structure before reading. Then, ask students to identify and record the missing story grammar elements as they are encountered in the story. This gets them reading purposefully.

• **Predicting.** A prediction uses clues or background information to deduce what might happen next in a story. Good readers do this naturally. You can help student become a better predictor by stopping at a designated point in the story and asking a prediction question. Example: “*What do you think will happen when ...*” Before making a prediction, student needs to remember at least two story clues and background information that he/she thinks are important. After a prediction is made, he/she should read to ahead to see if he/she was right.

• **Inference.** Inferring is using information in the story or text to understand or conclude things not specifically stated. Good readers naturally do this. Like the prediction above, an inference must be based on known information or text clues. You can help students become better at inferring by stopping and asking an inference question. Students should list important clues or knowledge before identifying and describing their inference.

#### **6.1.6. Self-Selected Reading Practice.**

• **Reading practice.** Reading practice should be one of the primary activities in any reading instructional program. Just like learning to play the piano, students need to practice reading every day if they are to get better. Extensive reading has been linked to improvement in general knowledge, vocabulary, spelling, fluency, word identification, and reading comprehension (Allington, 2012; Cunningham & Allington, 2010; Cunningham & Stanovich, 2001; Krashen, 2004). Thus, reading for enjoyment should be the main work of reading class. For this to occur, classroom libraries need to include an abundance of high quality books at varying levels that reflect a variety of interests. Students should always practice reading books that are at their independent level or below.

## **7. Conclusion**

Some examples of the types of instructional strategies appropriate for students with intellectual disabilities are described in this article. Instruction for this group may include more repetition than students in a general education setting, and growth may occur more slowly; however, students with all levels of intellectual disabilities can reach their full literacy potential if they provided appropriate instruction. And just like other students, they learn best when reading instruction is provided in meaningful contexts and the focus is on creating meaning with print and not on mastering isolated reading subskills.

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