

Speech-language pathologists can help kids who struggle to read

May 25 2016



University of the Pacific Professor Jeannene Ward-Lonergan works with a student in the university's Language-Literacy Center. Credit: University of the Pacific

Educators call it the fourth-grade slump: a time when some children, faced with increasingly complex schoolwork, start to lose interest in

reading. Yet classroom teachers may not employ the strategies that can get these students back on track, according to speech-language pathology researchers at University of the Pacific.

In a review of three decades of research, Pacific professors Jeannene Ward-Lonergan and Jill Duthie pinpointed the strategies that have proved most effective at helping young readers better comprehend "expository discourse," the complex academic language that becomes increasingly common beginning in fourth grade. Their findings appear in the spring issue of the journal *Topics in Language Disorders*.

Expository writing is used in subjects like history, science, geography and math, and is heavily emphasized in the Common Core State Standards. Hallmarks of this prose are phrases like "as a result," "can be interpreted as," "by comparison" and "to illustrate."

"Despite the difficulties that [students](#) have with comprehending expository text, teachers in grades four to 12 typically do not instruct students in the reading comprehension process," said Ward-Lonergan, founding co-director of the Language-Literacy Center at University of the Pacific. "Unfortunately many upper elementary, middle school and [high school teachers](#) presume that their students have mastered these fundamentals."

The right strategy can make a big difference. For example, research demonstrates that one approach, easily remembered with the mnemonic RAP, can increase reading comprehension by as much as 36 percentage points among students who struggle with expository writing. RAP stands for read a paragraph, ask questions about the main idea and details, and put main ideas and details into your own words.

Other successful strategies include:

- graphically organizing information into visual maps
- using a pencil or sticky note to mark confusing, important or surprising portions of a text with specific symbols (?, or !, for example)
- underlining or circling key words and phrases that the reader doesn't understand and/or that occur repeatedly in a text
- writing a very brief summary of each paragraph or section in the margin of the text or on a sticky note

Ward-Lonergan and Duthie hope their review will serve as a resource for classroom teachers looking for a comprehensive summary of effective techniques, as well as for speech-language pathologists and other specialists who support students who are experiencing learning difficulties.

"Language acquisition is complex and involves many parts of the brain, and some children's brains work differently and require different techniques," said Duthie, who co-directs the Language-Literacy Center with Ward-Lonergan.

Finding the right techniques is important. "The ability to comprehend and produce spoken and written expository discourse is critical for academic success and literacy development," Duthie said.

Provided by University of the Pacific

Citation: Speech-language pathologists can help kids who struggle to read (2016, May 25)
retrieved 26 April 2024 from

<https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-05-speech-language-pathologists-kids-struggle.html>

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