

The Sound Reading System

Reflections on it Efficacy

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I now have several years' experience using The Sound Reading System. Its efficacy is affirmed by the excellent results it produces. When using the SRS my expectation is to bring the children I tutor either up to or above the reading and spelling level of their peers. The ability of the SRS to routinely produce such results is borne out by entry and exit level assessments of reading and spelling that I carry out. I achieve these results across a wide range of children, including many with a very high level of dyslexic type difficulty. The only caveat to this has been children with severe underlying language difficulty, or those with wider cognitive difficulties. However, these children have still made progress using the SRS, but for them it has not always proved possible to 'close the gap' to their peers. I am more convinced than ever that the Sound Reading System is, quite simply, the best!

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After some 30+ years as a primary and middle-school teacher, in March 2012 I became a full-time tutor specialising in teaching literacy to children and young people with dyslexic type difficulties. About 90% of my work is based on the Sound Reading System (SRS), with the remainder made up of a mixture of maths, tutoring for exams and general support for youngsters on the Autistic Spectrum. When I left the school I had been working in, I went from tutoring 8 children per week to 40 within the space of a year and presently have 44 on my books and a waiting list. While this is partly a sad reflection on the state of education in and around Aberdeen, it is also a fantastic endorsement of the SRS. The more I use the SRS the greater my appreciation has grown for both the genius of Diane McGuinness and the tremendous work and thought Fiona Nevola put into developing the scheme.

The results I get using the SRS are excellent. I have taught literacy skills for over thirty years and set up and ran the Support for Learning Department in the last school in which I worked. I therefore have extensive experience of a wide range of schemes developed for learners with dyslexic type difficulties. While I achieved satisfactory results with some of these schemes, none came close to matching the results I now routinely achieve with the SRS.

Using the SRS it is now my expectation to bring any child of normal intelligence and with reasonable language skills at least up to an age appropriate level with their reading. For most spelling improves at the same rate. As far as possible and appropriate I carry out standardised entry and exit level testing. Below is a brief synopsis of a representative sample of these tests.

It is important to reflect on the few children whom I have not been successful in helping - two with severe general / global learning difficulties who were never able to advance beyond reading simple code text (One sound to one letter correspondence). I've also tutored a couple of teenage boys with frontal sphere epilepsy, both of whom became proficient and fluent at encoding, so wrote and spelled really well, but never achieved true fluency in their reading. At present I'm tutoring a 6 year old who has just been given the same diagnosis. In spite of this and some very challenging behavioural difficulties, he is progressing steadily, albeit at a much slower rate than most of the children I see. I'm also presently tutoring a few children with severe language difficulties and a girl with severe hearing difficulties - they are doing amazingly well, and the reciprocal link between literacy and language means that the feedback from the SRS to their language skills is hugely beneficial.

This brings me to the observation that taking a child or young person through the SRS invariably has a notably positive benefit on their general language skills, so much so that I feel for some this is the most important thing they gain from tuition. This struck me at first as an unexpected bonus, but the reciprocity between spoken language and literacy skills is well recognised "*... pure reading disorders are rare: different language skills interact to produce a spectrum of reading outcomes. Moreover, bidirectional links between oral and written language mean that literacy can itself transform spoken language.*" (*Dyslexia, Speech and Language, page 320, Snowling and Stockhouse, 2005*)

At the other end of the scale, I've had some very hard working and intelligent children who have gone from reading and spelling scores which placed them in the dyslexic / severely or even very severely dyslexic range (standardised scores in the 70 to 85 range) to scores significantly above their age norms (standardised scores of above 115). This includes a young girl who came to me as a non-reader at age 6 years. She started off with a

considerable amount of work at SRS Foundation and then worked through SRS1, with further Foundation work as appropriate. It took just over a year to take her through SRS1 at which point her reading comprehension age was over 10 years and she was reading Shakespeare for pleasure! Spelling did not rise to quite the same level but still showed significant gain, closing the gap to her peers. At her request she is now working through SRS2, which is not something I would normally do with a child of her age - but she really wants to do it!

My pattern of working is to see a child / young person once per week during term time for a tuition session that lasts for 50 to 60 minutes. In this time they are systematically taken through the SRS and are always sent away with a set of word cards to work on for the following week as well as passage reading tasks. I find myself continually adapting and adjusting wordlists and reading tasks to suit the individual – it is important to get this right – but I always work within the framework and follow the progression of the SRS.

Although my weekends and evenings are still busy I now see most of my clients during the school day. While some schools are reluctant to allow pupils to attend a specialist tutor during the school day, others are happy to facilitate this. Pupils who come for tuition during the school day always do so with the agreement of their school. This includes a 6 year old boy who travels down from Peterhead, a journey that takes over an hour each way, for his weekly tuition – and he attends on the recommendation of his head teacher. A 10 year old has special dispensation from his Local Education Authority to attend. The school was reluctant to allow him to come for tuition, so his parents went straight to the top! I have other schools that facilitate me tutoring pupils in the school and several that I work with very closely. Recently the top private girl's school in Aberdeen made it a condition of entry for a pupil that she came to me for tuition. A varied picture indeed.

The following table illustrates the results I obtain tutoring with the SRS.

Name & Age at start	Entry scores	Exit Scores	Gain in months	Months of tuition	Gain factor Gain in reading age divided by no of months tuition	Comments
EB (F) 6yrs 0mths	reading Below 6 yrs	9yrs 7mths	Over 43	20	43/20 = 2.15	reading comprehension has reached 10yrs 6m
	spelling Below 5yrs	6yrs 10 m	Over 22	20	22/20 = 1.1	
TR (M) 10yrs 10m	reading 8yrs 9m	10yrs 7m	22	9	22/9 = 2.4	Reading remains slow Continuing at SRS2
	spelling 7yrs 4m	10yrs 1m	33	9	33/9 = 3.7	
RF (M) 11yrs 4m	reading 9yrs 5m	11yrs 1m	20	10	20/10 = 2.0	Excellent progress, has low level speech pronunciation difficulty
	spelling 6yrs 1m	8yrs 7m	30	10	30/10 = 3.0	
HS (M) 11yrs 1m	reading 8yrs 2m	10y 6m	28	17	28/30 = 1.6	Steady progress now working at SRS2 & making good further progress
	spelling na	---	---	---	---	
JB (M) 9yrs 6m	reading 8yrs 9m	12yrs 10m	49	20	49/20 = 2.45	Went from very reluctant reader to a lad who loves reading.
	spelling 5yrs 7m	11yrs 4m	69	20	69/20 = 3.45	

Name & Age at start	Entry scores	Exit Scores	Gain in months	Months of tuition	Gain factor Gain in reading age divided by no of months tuition	Comments
RL (M) Reading 12yrs 0m spelling	9yrs 11m	15yrs 6m	67	23	67/23 = 2.0	An exceptionally bright boy who worked hard to achieve these results.
	8yrs 10m	15yrs 7m	81	23	81/23 = 3.5	
NM (F) reading 11yrs 0m spelling	9yrs 5m	10yrs 11m	18	16	18/16 = 1.1	Very high level of underlying difficulty - slow processing speed. Now reading for pleasure.
	6yrs 4m	8yrs 1m	21	16	21/16 = 1.3	
DH (M) reading 6yrs 6m spelling	Non reader	7yrs 8m	---	23	---	Reading still effortful but able to read anything that interests him.
		5yrs 7m	---	23	---	
CH (M) reading 11yrs 1m spelling	9yrs 1m	10yrs 8m	19	13	19/13 = 1.5	Slow processing speed and visual difficulties continuing to progress well.
	na	8yrs 1m	---	13	---	
FA (F) reading 9yrs 0m spelling	7yrs 3m	9yrs 11m	32	21	32/21 = 1.5	High level language difficulties – so amazingly good results.
	Below 5yrs	9yrs 10m	58	21	58/21 = 2.8	
DD (M) reading 10yrs 10m spelling	8yrs 8m	9yrs 6m	10	4	10/4 = 2.5	Dyspraxia and ADHD so very good progress indeed.
	5yrs 10m	6yrs 1m	3	4	3/4 = 0.75	
CR (M) reading 10yrs 6m spelling	11yrs 1m	12yrs 5m	16	4	16/4 = 4.0	Did not seem to have any underlying difficulties hence exceptional progress.
	6yrs 10m	8yrs 1m	15	4	15/4 = 3.75	
TW (F) reading 9yrs 3m spelling	9yrs 5m	10yrs 2m	9	4	9/4 = 2.25	Hardworking and lively. Continuing to make excellent progress.
	5yrs 10m	6yrs 7m	9	4	9/4 = 2.25	
TW (M) reading 11yrs 10m spelling	8yrs 6m	10yrs 0m	17	4	17/4 = 4.25	Dyspraxia and ADHD Excellent support for SRS at school and at home.
	5yrs 4m	7yrs 1m	21	4	21/4 = 5.25	

Due to the limited validity of data gathered by practitioners, the above figures cannot be viewed as scientific research; however, they are indicative of the quite remarkable efficacy of the SRS. Furthermore, they indicate an urgent need for objective research.

Behind each set of figures lies a human story – and while this is not the place to tell those stories – the educational, emotional and therefore social impact of a reading difficulty is often huge. It is sad to see pain endured by children due to the ignorance and obstinacy of educational establishments. I know through personal experience that even for those with severe underlying difficulties that can be classified as being of a dyslexic nature, nearly all children of normal intellectual ability can successfully be taught both reading and spelling.

The children who are easiest to tutor, and have made the best progress, are those whose school / teachers embrace the work I do and work with the weekly SRS word cards. Sadly it is a source of frustration having to continually (tactfully) work with children who are confused and misdirected by reading and spelling instructions that are ill informed and sometimes incredibly unhelpful. Although most schools in the Aberdeen area now teach reading using

either Jolly Phonics or the excellent Active Literacy Scheme developed in North Lanarkshire (a scheme with strong similarities to the SRS) teachers still tend to use an eclectic mix of methodologies, seemingly oblivious to the confusion this causes. There is no lack of goodwill but a real lack of knowledge and an unbelievable reluctance to let go of methods and materials that are not just ineffective but actually hold the developing reader back.

It strikes me that some of the bestselling reading schemes / schemes designed to help dyslexic learners are designed for idiot proof delivery – painting by numbers if you like – and so can be used by minimally qualified teaching assistants or parents. Toe-by-Toe and Word Wasp are excellent examples of this. In contrast SRS requires a degree of expertise, and by its nature encourages a practitioner to continually develop skills. I am forever fine tuning wordlists to the needs of each individual. For some the numbers of words on a wordlist are reduced and only two or three spelling patterns are looked at in each tuition session. For others words like psychedelic, psychology, misogyny, pseudonym and acquiescence (for the sound /S/) are added to keep interest and challenge alive. This allows one of the most essential ingredients of the SRS methodology to thrive: teaching to success, so that the learner who has experienced failure experiences what it is to achieve. When the complexity of the task is judged right the learner can move forward and experience success in every single tuition session.

But the SRS is not just about wordlists and spelling classifications and single word writing; it is also about the methodology of listening to the developing reader reading text. The part of the SRS training course that focuses on passage / book reading is invaluable. The carefully precise correction of errors, declarative instruction and the 'bridging' of short term audio memory are essential skills to be honed by the teacher. Finding the right book for each individual is frequently a challenge and, just as the wordlists can be adapted to each individual, so too the weekly reading tasks always need to be individualised so that they are challenging but achievable.

I enjoy using the SRS, mainly because it is so successful but also because it continually challenges me to further develop my skills as a tutor.

Peter Hansmann
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