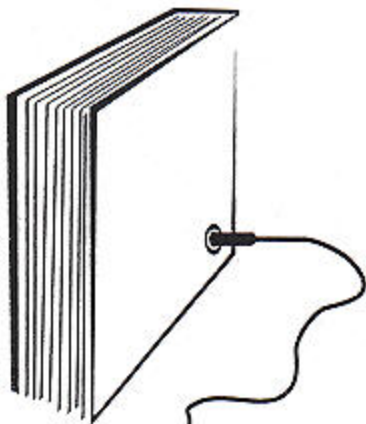


Eliminating — the Need for — Dumbed-Down Textbooks



by Marie Carbo

A large and growing number of students are unable to read their textbooks adequately. Intensive reading practice with recorded books permits teaching to the levels needed for success rather than to the student's present level of academic functioning.



Many educational reform efforts are doomed to fail because millions of America's students read poorly. It's not reasonable to believe that standards can be significantly raised if large percentages of U.S. students are unable to read even "dumbed-down" textbooks. The dumbing down of America's textbooks is only a symptom of a much larger, and far more serious, problem—the low reading ability of many of America's students.

Current estimates from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) tell us that 40 percent of our seventh graders cannot read their texts with sufficient ease and fluency to comprehend the material.¹ That figure jumps to an alarmingly high 60 per-

cent by twelfth grade. The cause is apparent. While American students daily spend three to five hours after school watching television, they read only a few minutes per day, on average.² That statistic has serious educational implications since most people become proficient readers by reading for substantial periods, over time.

To get to the heart of the matter, while the vast majority of American teachers use textbooks as the primary reading material for their students, a large, growing number of American students are incapable of reading those textbooks. Regardless of whether or not textbooks are the best or even a good way to teach a subject, we would all agree that it is critically important for our students to be able to read well. But, for most people, high reading competence generally takes years of practice with increasingly difficult reading materials. Some of our high school students are behind in that practice by thousands of hours.

How can the process of reading be accelerated, that is, how can intensive reading practice be provided so that students learn to read in short periods of time? And, since even short periods of time spent learning to read will be too long for some students, how can students be helped *immediately* to read their textbooks and other materials, so that they can keep up with class discussions and assignments right now?

The answer to both questions is the use of recorded books. However, books need to be recorded in a special way. There are techniques for recording materials that enable students to make unbelievably fast gains in reading, and there are ways to record that produce smaller gains



Photo courtesy of the Staff Development Center, Faulkner Ridge Elementary School, Columbia, Maryland.

but which enable students to master content.

Sharply Accelerating the Process of Learning to Read

In the mid-seventies, I discovered and used the method of recording books described in this section, with learning disabled, elementary students, who were reading two to five years below grade level. The group of twelve who participated in my first investigation, gained eight months in word recognition in six weeks (about twelve times their previous rate of gain).³ A second experiment I conducted with inner city, twice-retained, junior high students who were reading at a preprimer to third-grade level, resulted in gains of three years in reading comprehension in only one year (a rate sixteen times greater than their previous average rate).⁴

Since that time, thousands of teachers have been trained in the recorded book method. Some of the most successful programs were initiated by high school teachers. Ann-Marie Romagnoli found that her Chapter 1 students made more than

a three-year gain in reading comprehension during one school year;⁵ and special education teacher, Linda Queiruga reported average reading comprehension gains of 2.2 years in only four months for 32 learning disabled students (Queiruga's gains were twenty-four times the students' previous progress in reading!).⁶

Queiruga's System For Recording

Queiruga's results were astonishingly high, especially considering that most of her ninth and tenth-graders were reading on only a third or fourth-grade level at the beginning of her class, and that they had been classified as severely learning disabled for approximately eight to ten years of their school careers. Some of Queiruga's students had limited English proficiency, some had severe hearing problems, and others had behavior disorders. Since Queiruga's results were so unusual, I would like to describe her procedures in detail.

Queiruga attended my training on the recorded book method and decided to try the technique with one

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student, Stuart. Stuart was a bright, learning disabled tenth-grader, reading on a fourth-grade level. He selected articles for Queiruga to record that were approximately four to eight years above his reading level. For a few weeks, Queiruga monitored and adjusted her recordings according to Stuart's needs until both felt that the recordings were "just right" for him.

After a little more than two months of working with the book recordings, Queiruga tested Stuart and found that he had gained 2.9 years in reading comprehension on the Gates McGinitie Reading Test. She couldn't believe the results and retested him using a different reading test. Stuart scored a 2.7 year gain. With a small district grant, Queiruga purchased walkmans, a tape recorder, a tape duplicator, and tapes, and recorded 200 very short stories during the summer (most were two to four pages in length). She recorded about five to eight minutes of text per tape side, and used about two to three tape sides per story. Each story and its tapes were stored in an individual folder, with the reading level recorded on the folder.

In September, Stuart discussed his gains with Queiruga's 32 learning disabled students, and then he and Queiruga described the method, basically telling the students that if they followed the program, they could make high gains, too. Then Queiruga apprised each student privately of his or her reading level so they could monitor their own progress, and told them to read whatever they liked. She explained that the fastest progress probably would be made by those who selected the highest level material that they could read fluently, after listening to the recording of that material two or three times. Reading levels were clearly visible on each book folder.



Photo courtesy of Key School, District 4, New York City.

The rest, as they say, is history. Not surprisingly, those students in Queiruga's program who selected low-level material and barely looked at the words made poor progress. The scores of those youngsters were averaged in with the group, and yet, Queiruga's students still gained 2.2 years in four months. Those youngsters who worked with high-level materials and gave the recordings and the text their full attention gained from two to four years in only four months. What was the only complaint from the high-achieving students when I interviewed them? Queiruga should have recorded more high-level materials they said, and, after four months of working with the tape recordings, they wanted books to be recorded at a slightly faster pace.

As an interesting side note, in a recent synthesis of the research on compensatory and remedial education, Anderson and Pellicer noted that low-level reading materials predominate in Chapter 1 reading programs, in which most students become "lifers," and never get out. "Unfortunately," the authors stated, "the data suggest that teachers teach to the students' present levels of academic functioning, rather than to

the levels they will need to achieve to be successful in the future."⁹

The recorded book method described in the next section can help both emerging readers and poor readers to fluently read material on much higher reading levels than they have previously read. This transformation often takes only ten to fifteen minutes, the time it takes students to listen to the recording a few times while following along in the book and then to read the material aloud.

How to Record Books for Maximum Reading Gains

To raise students' reading abilities in short periods of time, *high-level, high-interest* reading materials have proven to be most effective. Usually textbooks are dry and uninteresting for students. To accelerate reading achievement, therefore, textbooks are generally the *least desirable* material to use initially. Only after students' reading levels have been raised (and this needn't take long), should they work extensively with textbooks. To accelerate the process of learning to read then, short amounts of high-interest material should be recorded, using a slightly slow reading pace, short, natural

phrases, and good expression. The slow recordings synchronize for the reader the spoken and printed words, so that the student can visually track the words, and connect those words with the spoken words on the recording. By placing a small amount of material on a tape side (as little as two minutes), even severely disabled readers can listen more than once to the recording while they follow along in the book without becoming bored or overwhelmed. After two or three listenings, most students are able to read the passage fluently.

Passages should be recorded in short, natural phrases so that the printed page is translated into meaningful segments; the slight pauses between phrases help to increase word recognition because they provide time for the brain to absorb the printed material. Not only does this recorded book method increase students' reading fluency, the speech patterns and writing of youngsters usually improve as well.

Formula For Success

This simple formula describes the amount to record and the pace to use, depending upon the students' reading level and the level of the book being recorded:

If the gap between the student's reading level and the level of the book is *small*, record about *ten to thirty minutes* of the material on one tape side, at a *normal* pace, with *natural* expression, and phrasing. If the gap is *large*, use a *slower* pace, *fewer* words to a phrase, *exaggerate* your expression somewhat, and record much less—about *two to eight minutes*.⁹

One of the reasons why the recorded book method has been so successful is because it matches the reading styles of many poor readers.¹⁰ Research indicates that youngsters who are at risk in our schools

are strongly global, tactile, and kinesthetic. Globals, in particular, need many experiences with high-interest, holistic reading methods, especially those that provide a *model* for good reading.

How to Record Textbooks

The procedures for recording texts described in this section were used by two middle school teachers, Ginny Sorrell and Sharon Briggs for their teamed English/History classes.¹¹ Their recommendations are most appropriate for students who are reading only one to three years below the level of the text. If the gap is larger than three years, then it is *highly advisable* to begin with special recordings of quality books that are of high interest to the student, according to the directions outlined previously.

Sorrell and Briggs devised different procedures for recording texts and recreational reading materials. Texts were recorded as "directed reading assignments" and helped students focus on the major content points, whereas novels were recorded "for pleasure, in one smooth flow." The results reported by Sorrell and Briggs are impressive, including:

... improved grades, no failures among students using tapes, no moans or groans at the mention of reading, raised hands, volunteering to answer questions during class discussions, fewer discipline problems, keeping up with the class and homework being done.¹²

Sorrell and Briggs began with this reasoning: If their at-risk students were not dumb, could memorize songs, and spent "most of their time with a walkman plastered on their heads, listening to music with never a book in sight," why not use recordings to teach history and English? Sorrell and Briggs viewed the taping of materials as a win-win situation since, even if their students did not look at the books, just listening to the tapes was likely to help them keep up with the content and improve their grades. With the aid of the tape recordings, many at-risk students could be given the identical homework assignments and deadlines as the rest of the students. In effect, the recordings would become "surrogate teachers," and, they continued to reason, should enable their at-risk students to (a) improve their reading skills; (b) master the course content; and, (c) raise

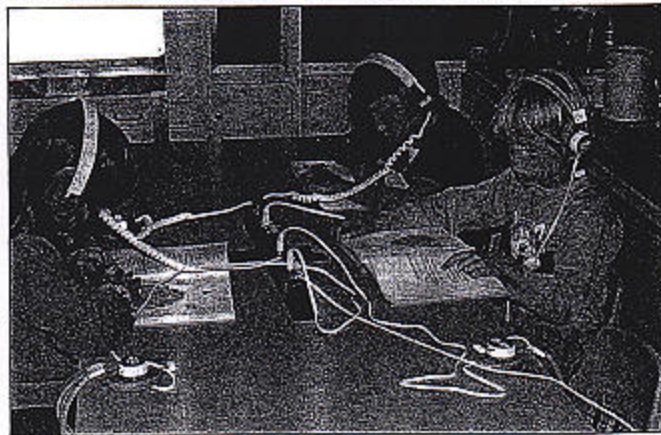


Photo courtesy of Juanita Elementary School, Kirkland, Washington.

their self-esteem. They were proved right on all counts.

How the Program Works

The tapes for student use can be housed in a classroom or a media center. Student librarians can handle the check-in-check out process. After the master tapes are made, they should be kept under lock and key so that the original masters are never

is best to use small Walkman-type recorders. Students then can check out tapes during reading time in class, and for take-home use.

Summary

Higher educational standards have increased the number of American students who are taking advanced courses than did ten years ago; however, literacy levels are still ominously low. It's no wonder that in science, mathematics and reading, "we were doing a lousy job 20 years ago, and we're not doing a better job now," according to Patricia Albjerg Graham, president of the Spencer Foundation, with the difference being that "20 years ago, it didn't matter as much."¹³

Research during the last fifteen years indicates that recording high-interest, high-level reading materials in small amounts, with a slow pace and short phrases, accelerates the reading progress of low-level readers. With this method, the reading model presented is interesting, slow enough to be absorbed by the student, and repeated sufficiently so that learning is assured. In this way, the teacher demonstrates high expectations for students' achievements and a high level of respect for diverse reading styles and interests. Recorded books help to remove stress because the student is in control of the number of repetitions and reads aloud when ready.

Tape recording textbooks permits students to read and understand many types of difficult reading material. An important side benefit is that recordings of texts can increase students' comprehension, word recognition, and vocabulary development. In other words, it is well worth the effort to record and organize materials because the students who use them are not only likely to master concepts better, but are also

very likely to raise their reading levels quite substantially.

High standards and expectations, coupled with dumbed-down textbooks and low literacy levels, can only produce more teacher frustration and feelings of helplessness. Indeed, reading levels must be raised substantially for any real reform efforts to have an effect. Recorded books can both raise students' reading levels quite dramatically in short periods of time and help students to master content. [E]

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1. G.R. Anrig and A.E. LaPointe, "What We Know About What Students Don't Know," *Educational Leadership* (November 1989): 4-9; and J.A. Langer, A.N. Applebee, L.V.S. Mullis, and M.A. Foertsch, *Learning to Read in Our Nation's Schools: Instruction and Achievement in 1988 at Grades 4, 8, and 12*, (Princeton, N.J.: National Assessment of Educational Progress, Educational Testing Service, June 1990).
2. "Bush Says Schoolchildren Watch Too Much TV," *New York Times National*, May 28, 1992, B10.
3. Marie Carbo, "Teaching Reading With Talking Books," *The Reading Teacher* 32 (1978): 267-273; and Marie Carbo, "A Word Imprinting Technique for Students With Severe Memory Disorders," *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 11 (1978): 3-5.
4. Marie Carbo, Rita Dunn and Kenneth Dunn, *Teaching Students to Read Through Their Individual Learning Styles* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1986), Chapter 2.
5. *Reading Styles Progress Report*, (New York: National Reading Styles Institute, 1990), 15.
6. Linda Queiruga, "A Reading Styles Experiment With Learning Disabled, High School Students," (National Reading Styles Institute, 1992).
7. Lorin W. Anderson and Leonard O. Peltier, "Synthesis of Research on Compensatory and Remedial Education," *Educational Leadership*, (1990): 10-16.
8. Anderson and Peltier, 12.
9. See the following by Marie Carbo: *How to Record Books for Maximum Reading Gains* (National Reading Styles Institute, 1989); and "Advanced Book Recording: Turning It Around for Poor Readers," *Early Years*, 15 (1985): 46-48. Samples of recorded books are available from the National Reading Styles Institute (P.O. Box 39, Roslyn Hts., NY 11577).
10. Carbo, Dunn, and Dunn, 117-144.
11. Sharon Briggs and Ginny Sorrell, "Using Recorded Books in the Subject Areas With Older Students," 69-80 (in *How to Record Books for Maximum Reading Gains* by Marie Carbo). Also see, Ruth Lyn Meese, "Adapting Textbooks for Children With Learning Disabilities in Mainstream Classrooms," *Teaching Exceptional Children* 24 (1992): 49-51.
12. Briggs and Sorrell, 70.
13. Robert Rothman, "Reforms Not Widely Incorporated, Report Concludes," *Education Week* (February 5, 1992), 9.

checked out by students. Master tapes should be used only to make copies for checkout. Copies are labeled and have check out cards (a library card envelope is glued to the outside of the tape case). It is advisable to have a permanent library of copies of each textbook chapter available for students and teachers to use. To enable students to decide where, when, and how many times they want to listen to a recording, it