

Series: Powerful Best Reading Practices for Struggling Readers

Part 4: Creating Remarkable Reading Gains With “Talking Stories”

by Marie Carbo, Ed.D.

Within minutes, Tommy was reading a story three years above his reading level. He had worked for only 10 minutes with a special recording I made for him of a passage in *Charlotte’s Web*—his favorite story. After only six weeks, Tommy gained an incredible 1.3 years in reading. Overall, my eight struggling readers made an average reading gain of eight months in only six weeks (Carbo, 1978).

Since then, thousands of teachers have worked with my special method of recording. Even the most severely handicapped students have learned to read with this method; some have made miraculous gains in reading. Graduate student Angela Haller described one such miracle in a letter to me:

I am using your recording method with a nine-year-old boy who is missing half of his left hemisphere due to surgery for a brain tumor. I have been excited to see him change. He truly enjoys reading now. He likes to listen to the recordings and will do that on his own... If he continues learning at this rate over the summer, he should be at a reading level equivalent to fifth grade.

Another favorite story of mine came from Dr. Lois LaShell, who was an elementary teacher at the time. I especially love the ending, which shows the power of this recording method:

Jean’s parents wanted to take her out of third grade in September and place her in a

special school because she was reading on a first-grade level. I asked for time to work with the child using Marie’s recorded books. Jean was reading third-grade books by Christmas. One month later, her father came in and asked me if I could teach him to read, too.

Why the Carbo Recording Method Creates High Reading Gains

For many young children and poor readers, there’s a substantial time lag between when they see and say a word. This lag produces slow, laborious reading that makes comprehension all but impossible. It’s terribly difficult for students to recall what a passage is about when they must spend so much effort figuring out each word. In effect, these special, slightly slow-paced recordings do what the child is not yet able to do naturally: They verbalize the printed words with the correct pace, phrasing, and expression. As a result, students make fewer reading errors, and the possibility of forming incorrect reading patterns is diminished (Carbo, 2007, 2010).

A Large Sight Vocabulary Develops

Best of all, it’s not necessary to record dull, repetitive, simple reading materials to improve a struggling reader’s sight vocabulary. In fact, words presented within high-interest stories are easier to learn and retain than words presented in isolation or within a dull story. Why? Because the most powerful kind of memory is *emotional memory*. And, since each student can decide

the number of times to listen to a recording and when to read aloud (usually two or more listenings are needed), the student is in control of his or her own learning. This special method of recording not only dramatically increases reading enjoyment, comprehension, and sight vocabulary, it puts students in control of their learning and empowers them.

Reading Comprehension Improves Quickly

When students follow along with these special recordings, they add many new words to their memory bank that they can read and understand rapidly on sight. This sharp increase in sight vocabulary promotes reading comprehension and vocabulary development (Beck & McKeown, 1991). Since students know more sight words, their brain is freed to focus only on the few unknown words in a text. Students are thus enabled to read increasingly difficult material. After repeated work with the recorded texts, the brain *automatically* begins to identify more and more word patterns and to decipher more new words. Students can read rich, varied language with the assistance of the recordings, and they are able to read and enjoy stories that appeal to their interests. As a result, they read more and more for pleasure, which speeds up the development of their sight vocabulary and their understanding of words (Nagy, Anderson, & Herman, 1987; Stanovich, 2000; Sternberg, 1987; Swanborn & de Gloppe, 1999).

Carbo Recording Method®

- Slow pace
- Small amount
- Good expression

Carbo, 2009

What the Student Does



- Relaxes
- Listens and follows along 2-3 times
- Reads to self
- Discusses and reads back a portion to an aide, peer, teacher—group

Why the Carbo Method Works

- High-interest stories have high meaning to the brain
- Meaning increases learning and comprehension
- The brain is a pattern sorter
- With sufficient modeling of text, the brain automatically identifies word patterns and begins to decipher unknown words

The Gap Between Affluent and Low-Income Students Is Reduced

Children of affluent parents have much larger vocabularies than children from low-income households. Recent research indicates that children of professional parents “hear 30 million more words by age 3” than children of low-income parents (Motoko, 2013). When we combine that research with the fact that the vocabulary gap between these two groups widens rapidly over time, it becomes clear that specially recorded stories are critically important for low-income students. The recorded stories described in this article enable low-income students to connect the printed and spoken word, and to learn many new vocabulary words rapidly.

Students Feel Successful Almost Immediately

When students work with high-interest, specially recorded stories, their reading fluency, comprehension, and confidence improve quickly. Their brain becomes more engaged and attentive as they read interesting stories, and that increased engagement enhances comprehension. As success builds on success, the gains keep multiplying. When students hear themselves reading well and no longer stumble over words in front of their peers, they feel confident. When they see their reading levels rising rapidly, they feel smarter and happier. I have seen angry bullies become calm and helpful students because they can read well. For many struggling readers, reading becomes the favorite part of their school day.

Recent Research Results with Carbo Recorded Stories

Over the past year, research with our online reading program, which features more than 550 specially recorded, high-interest short stories (recorded by project editor and author Bob Cole and me), has produced unusually high gains in short periods of time (see nrsl.com for more research results). Here are a few examples:

- 54 struggling readers in grades 2-7 gained 2.1 years in reading in five months (Traver Elementary School, Traver, CA)
- 22 special education students in grades 9-12 gained three years in reading in eight months (Boyd County High School, Boyd County, KY)
- 31 special education and Title I students in grades 1-5 gained 1.7 years in reading in six months (RTR Elementary School, Ruthton, MN)
- 40 struggling readers in grades 5-8 gained 1.8 years in reading in five months (Intermediate School 206B, Bronx, New York City)

- 12 struggling readers in grades 7-8 gained 1.3 years in six months (Walker Jr. High School, Monahans, TX)

Let's Teach Reading the Way the Brain Learns!

According to brain research, my special recordings raise reading levels and reading enjoyment rapidly because: 1) students are emotionally engaged by the high-interest, challenging reading materials that they can choose; 2) reading comprehension is nurtured and supported by the slow pace, special phrasing, and good expression of the recordings; 3) the small amount of text enables students to master it in a few repetitions and ensures success; 4) the task is multimodal; 5) students control the amount of repetition they need and when they are able to read aloud, so there is little to no stress (Caine, Caine, McClintic, & Klimek, 2005; Jensen, 2006, 2012).

See, Hear and Work With Talking Stories

Click on "Sample Stories" at nrsi.com. Students can work with any of the 14 K-12 stories recorded by Bob Cole and me. For maximum results, have students choose a story that is slightly higher than their reading level. Encourage them to listen to and follow along in their recorded story at least twice. Next they can play the story game and answer the story questions. In the actual online program, students are formally evaluated as they read aloud a small part of the story and provide a story summary.

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For information about Power Reading Online, the brain-compatible reading program used at I.S. 206 in the Bronx, and many of the schools listed in this article, as well as to work with Carbo recordings, visit www.nrsi.com.