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# the guided reading approach: a practical method to address diverse needs in the classroom

*By Laura M. Schaffer and Barbara R. Schirmer*

Many deaf students struggle with learning to read. This is the case nationally as well as at the Michigan School for the Deaf (MSD). In 2006, the elementary teaching staff began working together to implement a change in their reading instruction so their approach would be systematic and consistent across grade levels. Prior to that, teachers were using a variety of methods, including a basal series purchased by the school several years earlier. With the diverse backgrounds and specific learning needs of many of our students, it was essential to choose an approach that allowed targeted instruction based on individual student needs. The Guided Reading Approach, developed by Fountas and Pinnell (1996) and popular among teachers of hearing students, was one such model. Additionally, this approach was among the nine areas of literacy recommended for use with deaf students by the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center. However, there was little previous research to show its effectiveness with deaf students.

With little research on successful reading programs for deaf students, MSD chose to implement and investigate the effectiveness of the Guided Reading Approach as the fundamental lesson structure for teaching reading on a daily basis within a balanced approach of methods for teaching literacy that also included activities such as shared reading and writing, independent reading, and teacher storyreading. However, some aspects of guided reading had to be modified for teaching deaf students. Some of these modifications involved



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asking the students to read using story sign (reading publicly in sign rather than silently), pre-teaching vocabulary, and retelling in American Sign Language (ASL). As an ASL/English bilingual school, we also incorporated into guided reading lessons ways to distinguish differences between both languages.

The focus of this approach is on small group instruction and it allows the teacher to choose from any reading material. This is especially beneficial because the teacher can identify texts that are motivating and meaningful. The teacher also has the flexibility of selecting text that is thematically connected to other content being studied in the classroom. The lesson structure itself follows a pattern of *before*, *during*, and *after* reading activities that are specifically targeted to students' needs based on the teacher's ongoing assessment of each child. Because this model pinpoints a student's instructional reading level, the teacher is able to build upon each student's knowledge base to steadily improve language skills, word recognition, fluency, and comprehension skills regardless of initial ability and background. Data collected in the form of monthly running records enabled us to track student progress and determine the success of the Guided Reading Approach with our deaf elementary students at MSD.

In our first year of using the Guided Reading Approach, the majority of our students in grades one through five were reading at an early kindergarten to early first grade level. The students lacked a solid foundation of language, vocabulary, background

knowledge, and word recognition skills. In other words, they were at the emergent and early stages of literacy development. Our challenge was to boost their ability to read text at levels closer to their respective grade levels. Our primary focus during this first year was on building word recognition skills. As the students became more skilled readers, the emphasis in following years changed to building fluency and comprehension as well as fostering greater independent reading competence.

## **The Guided Reading Approach at MSD**

### *Assessment*

This approach to teaching reading requires that the teacher determine each student's instructional reading level. Though there are many different ways to assess instructional level, running records (Clay, 2000) is the tool that MSD chose. When conducting a running record, the teacher asks the student to read a passage in story sign. The teacher keeps track of omissions, substitutions, words the students cannot identify, and fluency. If the student's word recognition falls between 90-95 percent, the readability level of the passage is considered to be the student's instructional level. This level is called instructional because it offers the best opportunity to build on the skills the student already possesses and yet is still challenging. In other words, the text is neither too frustrating nor too easy. At MSD a running record kit was developed with several books at each level. Using the Fountas and Pinnell book leveling system, running record

books were selected for appropriate vocabulary and concepts that were not too heavily abstract as well as content that was not too culturally hearing based, such as telephones or animal noises. After running records were completed, students were grouped homogeneously by instructional level. Other variables considered in grouping were students' decoding skills, preferred language output (spoken English or ASL), and learning styles. The groups were flexible and, therefore, changed during the course of the year depending on the outcome of the monthly running records.

### **Instruction**

Students spend about five sessions with one book. Each session with the students includes a *before*, *during*, and *after* reading activity and lasts approximately 10-20 minutes. The following is a typical weekly lesson structure. The teacher is expected to tailor each specific activity to the needs and levels of the students based on monthly running records and daily observations and anecdotal notes.

#### **Day 1:**

**Before:** Prior knowledge is activated, new knowledge necessary for understanding the story is built, and new vocabulary is taught, often with pictures.

With emergent and early readers, the amount of time spent at this step is more substantial. For example, one reading group read a book about ice climbing. One of our staff members does this as a hobby, so he was invited to come and meet with this particular reading group. He brought his climbing gear and let the students try it on to feel its bulk and weight. He brought many pictures of himself climbing ice and going into ice caves. The various parts of the climbing gear were labeled with index cards by the students. They were fascinated by this experience and were motivated to read their books. Many connections to the text were constructed by the students from interacting with the climbing gear and the pictures. They were able to take their understanding of ice climbing to a deeper level. After this lengthy introduction to the book, the students were better prepared to have more meaningful interactions with the text.

**During:** The teacher has a copy of the book and does a "picture walk" with the students, encouraging them to tell the story from the pictures using ASL. The text is generally ignored at this

point, though targeted vocabulary might be highlighted.

**After:** The teacher asks questions about the picture walk, asks for predictions, and reviews vocabulary.

#### **Day 2-4:**

**Before:** A brief activity takes place focusing on targeted skills, such as reading strategies, building vocabulary, text structure, word recognition and decoding skills, and ASL concepts.

**During:** Students read the book to themselves. Often, especially at the emergent level, the students are asked to sign the story to themselves at their individual pace. Students reading text at higher levels read silently. The teacher focuses on one or two students per day to observe, in detail, and note the strategies, or lack of strategies, that the students use while reading. For example, one teacher observed a student sign the sentence "The boy got on the bike." The student signed *got* and *on* separately. As the other students continued to read, the teacher intervened with that specific student to explain that one sign expresses both English words. The student practiced this with the teacher and then continued reading. The teacher

documented this as a skill to be reviewed in upcoming lessons. During reading, the teacher also takes note of challenges in vocabulary and decoding. This information is then used to develop targeted *before* and

*after* lessons for the following day.

**After:** A brief comprehension or fluency activity is carried out. This can be as simple as a quick retelling of the story or sequencing pictures from the book. A fluency activity might include the student taking turns reading with a partner, re-reading the text independently, or doing what is called choral reading, where the students read together with the teacher. For choral reading, our teachers like to display one copy of the text so everyone can see it.

#### **Day 5:**

Enrichment activities are generally conducted on the last day. Students can choose to do a reader's theater activity with the book or buddy read (read back and forth with a partner). Usually, a writing activity, such as rewriting the ending or reader's response, concludes the experience with the book. A new text is then selected for the following week.

**After this lengthy introduction to the book, the students were better prepared to have more meaningful interactions with the text.**

## Research Findings on Using the Guided Reading Approach with Deaf Students

When we analyzed the running records data from the first two years, we found several major patterns (Schirmer & Schaffer, in press). First, improvement ranged from a half-year to two years of progress each year. Though this seems modest, it is important to remember that research has consistently shown that the average deaf student gains one-third of a grade equivalent change each school year (Gallaudet Research Institute, 2006; Holt, 1993; Wolk & Allen, 1984). Second, achievement dropped precipitously from the end of one school year to the beginning of the next school year, particularly for students at the earlier grade levels, and it took several months of the new school year for the students to recapture the level they had achieved at the end of the previous school year. And third, reading achievement levels at the outset were low regardless of grade level, with none of the elementary students at or close to grade level when guided reading instruction began.

We are currently in our fourth year using guided reading and several changes have been made to fine tune the approach during years three and four. MSD now has a literacy specialist

who observes and coaches the teachers to help ensure fidelity to the approach and to assist with making appropriate individual modifications. We also recognize the importance of developing summer reading enrichment programs to slow the enormous summer regression. Our plan is to analyze the impact of the second two years and, based on teacher observations during those years, we fully expect to find that the students have made significantly greater progress than during the first two years.

The selection and implementation of the Guided Reading Approach at MSD was a good fit for our staff and students. Teachers are able to focus instruction on their students' strengths and weaknesses through ongoing assessment and clear benchmarks for their progress. The lesson structure permits the teacher to select *before*, *during*, and *after* activities that best address the needs of each student. It was critical for us in identifying a method for reading instruction to choose one that allowed us to implement systematic, quality reading instruction based on evidence of its effectiveness. The Guided Reading Approach is providing us with the instructional tools that are enabling our students to become increasingly capable readers.

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