

What SLPs Might Learn About EBP from Reading Research



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Language is the basis of all literacies. Scholars in speech-language pathology, reading, and linguistics have recently penned the same sentiments (Juel & Deffes, 2004; Moats, 2001; Shaywitz, 2003; Wallach, 2004). This agreement has consequently empowered the *Reading First* component of No Child Left Behind legislation (2001), and brought thousands of speech-language pathologists (SLP) in schools into the center of literacy acquisition (ASHA, 2001). Today's clinician is creating interventions that integrate oral and written communication with much broader definitions of language and literacy (Apel, 1999). It is only logical for SLPs to turn to the reading research to see what can be applied to their field. The "evidence-based practice" (EBP) of reading research comes from what is known as "scientifically based reading research" (SBRR). Here are just a few propositions from SBRR which have significant value for speech-language pathology.

- **Oral language is closely linked to early reading success** (Juel & Deffes, 2004).
- While successful readers in first grade have **20,000 word receptive vocabularies**, their struggling counterparts often command less than **5,000 words** (Moats, 2001).
- Failure to read by nine years of age, typically results in a **lifetime of functional illiteracy** for 70% of poor readers (Shaywitz, 2003).
- There are **four ways to learn to read words**- contextual predicting, letter-sound decoding, analogy, and visual memory (Cunningham, 2000; Gaskins, 2004)

There are many more such statements which serve as strong links between language and

literacy (Wallach, 2004). It is reassuring to see the five components of spoken language—phonology, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics— heralded as foundational to the reading act. These literacy links add a rich dimension to speech and language intervention programs and guide clinicians as they write educationally relevant language goals.

But close adherence to SBRR also invites some cautions for all practitioners, including the SLP. Pressley (2003) posed 12 ways in which reading research, by the very nature of collecting the reading data produce skewed results. Four of those common research conditions are selected for discussion below. They apply equally well to speech and language efforts to produce solid clinical research.

1. Replications of studies, though roundly lauded, are expensive and time consuming... and maybe we already know what they will find. It may not be wise to repeat experiments on the same topics to confirm the same information, when we all recognize that reading and language are such large and complex landscapes to explore.
2. Strategies must be tried on all populations if we are going to assert that "it works". We cannot assume that if an intervention works for one clinical group, or one age group, it will work for another. Broad applicability requires broad experimentation.
3. Old studies look at old conditions. We need to be cautious when we cite tried and true (old) data. It is not that these approaches are ineffective because they were validated long ago-it is simply that times have changed and children are in a much more complex environment today. Learning occurs in different ways.
4. Good classroom or group management greatly influences the results of studies. We know when clinicians closely control student behaviors, speech and language interventions are observed to be more effective than the same treatment in a potentially confusing environment. Group management does matter. Motivation matters. Neither SBRR nor similar speech and language research have systematically measured or reported the classroom or therapy milieu when comparing interventions.

Although humans have been listening and speaking for the last 20,000 years, they have not needed to learn to read and write until the last 300 years (Moats & Rosow, 2003). Within that time, reading has been systematically studied in this country for about 60 years (Lyon & Chhabra, 2004) and language for perhaps 35 years (Wallach, 2004). Several reading researchers have declared that we now have enough evidence to conclude that some reading instruction is effective and some is not (Lyon & Chhabra, 2004; Shaywitz & Shaywitz, 2004). Are speech and language researchers prepared to say the same about child language? Is the current research compelling enough? Has it all been studied? Has it all been said? ♦

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