Small Group Instruction for Language Skills Improvement

Eleanor Thurston Hall

Language Specialist and Coordinator of Special Education
Buckingham Browne & Nichols School
Cambridge, Massachusetts

Much has been written about individual tutoring in oral and silent reading, and in writing, for high-potential students with specific language disability. Less has been said or recorded about small group teaching for English-disabled children of all ages, especially middle school students who may be in grades six through nine. Since I have done diagnostic teaching with middle school groups for the past seven years in both public and private schools, it seems reasonable for me to write about the academic and personal gains students make and to share techniques that work.

The diagnostic teaching referred to in this article is based on the English language continuum developed in both the green and red versions of the Gillingham-Stillman Manual: Remedial Techniques for Children with Specific Disability in Reading, Spelling, and Penmanship.

A teacher needs an intimate knowledge of the sound/symbol relationships of English words, and a facility with the structure of phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. He or she also needs skills in the dynamics of human relations in order to guide groups so that students learn to interact by taking from and giving to their peers.

In the fall of 1969 I began teaching several public middle school students. Five were 6th graders, two 7th graders, and one 8th grader. Two had been tutored before and had been diagnosed as dyslexic. One 6th grader had serious language problems but had not received extra help the year before because he had made it so difficult for a tutor. Five had no previous tutoring but were working at least two grades below level in reading and spelling. All had above-average to high potential. Work with these students was all on an individual basis, forty minutes per day, three days per week.

Information sheets on all students were made out so that I would have ready access to age, handedness, parents’ names and home address, phone, brothers and/or sisters, interests, and notes on previous tutoring or testing.
Such information was continually up-dated with comments from teachers, parent conference notations, results of school testing during the year, plus scores of tests administered by me as records of progress.

The first diagnostic teaching results were recorded in each folder with a list of *knows* and *needs* according to the Gillingham language continuum. The first 20 minutes of each 40 minute lesson were devoted to word attack skills and developmental reading for improved comprehension and vocabulary. Twenty minutes were devoted to word analysis for spelling, writing sequences of sound in dictated sentences, proofreading, learning to build ideas into correctly structured phrases, sentences, and paragraphs. Constant review was included to be sure that learning was taking place.

Lesson plans were worked out in a teacher's book and student's worksheets were kept for reference in report writing and for visual reinforcement of gains. Reports with copies for parents, the Special Education Department, and the Middle School Guidance Department were made out in December, March, and June of each school year. In these reports, a written record of work done in oral and silent reading with comprehension, plus spelling and writing, was implemented by comparative scores from fall to spring in the Morrison McCall Spelling tests, Gray Oral Diagnostic Reading tests, and McCall Crabb Silent Reading and Comprehension timed tests. A list of materials used was also included.

The students made substantial gains during the first year. The program continued for a second year with several new students. One of the 8th graders went on to high school where she continued with a tutor. Several years later she sent us an invitation to a very special occasion for her. She had been admitted to a national honor society and had been given high recognition for her editing of the high school paper. She said it was because of the help we gave her in English; but we know that it was largely because she was highly motivated and worked hard.

In a report that another middle school language specialist and I prepared in December 1971, we said, in part:

... middle school students, with average and above intelligence, but testing from two to four years below grade level in spelling and reading, work with two language tutors for a variety of reasons. Some students missed language basics at one grade level or another because of changes in school systems; others did not pick up, master or retain the basics at the time they were taught because of emotional blocks; still others, because...