

Thinking Reader- an Evaluation

Introduction

As I started this journey of discovery, I was skeptical, yet hopeful. *Thinking Reader* seemed like the “perfect” tool for struggling readers. The first paragraph on the Tom Snyder website states that *Thinking Reader* is: “[an] innovative, research-validated program that systematically builds reading comprehension skills for students...” I want it for our school! We have several 7-12th graders who read at a 5th grade level- so you can count them among the 8 million middle and high school students who struggle with reading (Fisher & Ivey.) And the new 6th graders don’t seem that much better; many seem to have “fallen through the cracks” as the saying goes. Also, standardized testing, which I loathe, in the form of the MEAP, provided me with an arsenal of information to back up what I had already noticed: our students need comprehension strategies, they needed them now, and they needed lots of them. As I read through articles, the *Thinking Reader* website, and the intervention program checklist, I began to realize how important it is to really “double- check” and evaluate what you are buying. I was pleasantly surprised by *Thinking Reader’s* outcome and all it really had to offer, although some components aren’t 100% up to par with all of the five guidelines listed in Fisher & Ivey’s article. After summarizing the details of the program, the five guidelines will be listed according to Figure 1 (Fisher, p. 188) using the question posed: “Do the intervention initiatives cause students to read more and better?”

Details about *Thinking Reader*

The *Thinking Reader* website promised that after completing the program, students will be able to “apply reading strategies to improve understanding” as well as “master 7* scientifically proven reading comprehension strategies while they read;” I had to read the teacher’s manual before I realized that there was a writing component included. This was not advertised in depth on the website’s “front page.” The product is research-based and validated (links to articles about the research were listed on the website), and is the “*only* software program to use unabridged text of award-winning literature”, has leveled tiers for differentiated and “individualized” learning, and it is deemed to meet the “latest guidelines on universal accessibility.” The teacher would be able to choose from 9 different literature titles like *Roll of Thunder, Hear My Cry, My Brother Sam is Dead*, and *Esperanza Rising*. Oh, and of course, it meets State and National Standards; otherwise- why market it? As I stated in the beginning: skeptical, yet hopeful.

“Do the intervention initiatives cause students to read more and better?”

1. Significant teacher involvement in the design and delivery of the intervention is required.

At first glance, all computer programs seem to have very little teacher intervention other than helping students navigate the site, if so needed. In my opinion, there are very few programs out there that actually have the teacher do little but insert the CD-Rom onto the computer and perhaps show students how to get onto a site or program- after that- it’s the student that does all the work and teachers print reports. One

* Summarizing, Clarifying, Visualizing, Reflecting, Questioning, Predicting, and Feeling.
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good example of this would be “Accelerated Reader” (-and not that there is anything wrong with AR; it does get kids to read, but the “testing process” leaves more to be desired.)

Thinking Reader involves the teacher in the entire process: the teacher introduces the books which are read, leads discussions, and of course answers any questions left unanswered by the program. *Thinking Reader* seems more like a tool for teacher to be able to engage struggling readers and to build their self-confidence at the same time. This was evident in the comments of the two teachers who partook in the CAST (Center for Applied Special Technology) research by using *Thinking Reader* in their classrooms: students would join the regular reading groups, join in the discussions, and were able to “bring forth their opinions regarding their responses [from the computer generated writing]” and “their confidence...tremendously improved” as “there were no ‘surprises’ for them.” (Strangman, 2003) Being able to know and understand the text *before* having to talk about it allowed them to bring their own analysis of the text to the table.

2. Intervention is comprehensive and integrated such that students experience reading and writing as a cohesive whole.

Response journals = writing- Yes! This program has writing! But alas not what I was thinking at first... response journals use only a few sentences. But that can be good as a starting point for struggling readers...because often struggling readers are also struggling writers... Of course, all programs promise you the world. *Thinking Reader* delivers enough to build a strong community of readers. The whole piece comes together,

though, as students interact with the teacher, the program, and their peers in evaluating the literature and their comprehension.

3. Authentic children's and adolescent literature (fiction and nonfiction) are at the core of the intervention.

Seems very promising; at least on the fiction side: the *Thinking Reader* website touts that you can “Choose from 9 award-winning titles!” How long will these “last” I wonder. But then *I* have to keep reminding me that *I* am *not* a struggling reader and hence, it would only take me 2 weeks to read all of the offered titles. How long for a struggling reader? Maybe it will take the entire school year. The only negative I have seen in this program is that it does not offer non-fiction as an alternative. So far, I don't think I have seen or heard of intervention programs that offer a “comprehensive” line of *connected* non-fiction pieces for those readers who could care less about who Esperanza is. If there were non-fiction pieces, then maybe, in due time, that reader might be interested in Esperanza, as s/he now understands literature and can use the learned strategies to comprehend the book. Or maybe an article (non-fiction) about Mexico peaked the students' interest and now s/he *wants* to read about the immigrant girl from that land.

4. Teacher administered assessments are ongoing and are used to tailor individual instruction; writing samples and text-based discussions are one type of assessment used.

I guess I have to be a little cynical here and infer that it is then assumed that all teachers would actually use the assessments and not just utilize the program as a “babysitter.” If you truly want to know your students as readers and writers, you have to treat them as if they were award-winning novelists, essayists, and editors already. The writing samples covered with *Thinking Reader* do not seem to be long, but what prevents the teacher from making his/ her own if s/he realizes that a student can do more- even if it is just one or two extra sentences. While leading discussions, the teacher should have pulled some of the questions (maybe rephrase them slightly) students have already answered in the program and use those as starting points- what a way to build self-esteem—knowing that your students *will know* the answer.

5. The majority of intervention time is devoted to authentic reading and writing.

But shouldn't this be the case even in a regular setting? Whether a student is struggling or not; who wants to read trash? As stated earlier in section number 3, *Thinking Reader* uses authentic text, albeit not non-fiction. However, there are dozens of websites out on the web which have hundreds of different graphic organizers teachers could use in the same manner as the program. The only difference being that the teacher would need to record the article onto a tape/CD, and there would not be immediate vocabulary help or highlighted words as the student reads. Even though the *Thinking Reader* does have a writing component, I don't think it is enough. Students should be writing even more than this program asks for. Maybe it could be in the form of using graphic organizers, bulleted lists, or just every day journaling.

Conclusion

After the evaluation, I would have to recommend the *Thinking Reader* as a good intervention program. It seems to meet 90% of the required guidelines. Yet, no program can be successful without teacher involvement-that will always be the key. The teacher needs to bring to the table the lacking components no matter the program. I have requested an informational kit for my school, and will be asking the school board to purchase this program for our school; we need something[†], and that something, in my opinion, is the *Thinking Reader*.

[†] Currently we have no intervention programs in place in our school. ☹
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