Organizing Instruction for Struggling Readers in Tutorial Settings

Kouider Mokhtari, Amy C. Hutchison, Patricia A. Edwards

Teacher candidates aspiring to work with struggling readers in classroom and tutorial settings are often overwhelmed when attempting to coordinate the assessment and instruction for struggling readers. In this article, we suggest that many of the problems struggling readers encounter while reading stem from distinct yet fundamental sources of difficulty related to the types of text read (print or online), the tasks or activities readers engage in, and the sociocultural contexts of reading. We further argue that although these problems are as varied as the readers themselves, most struggling readers can be taught to read successfully when instruction is thoughtfully organized with their specific needs in mind.

Using a case scenario of Alyssa (all names are pseudonyms), a third-grade struggling reader, we share guidelines with an example of how her tutor, Sarah, planned, organized, and monitored instruction in a one-on-one tutorial setting—here defined as an instructional setting in which a single teacher or tutor, usually not the classroom teacher, plans and delivers instruction to one student. We anticipate that the insights shared will be helpful to professional educators, paraprofessionals, and volunteer or peer tutors who work with struggling readers in similar settings.

Case Scenario

Alyssa was referred for tutoring to the local university’s reading improvement clinic because of her low scores on the reading portion of the Iowa Test of Basic Skills. Although her performance on this test uncovered general areas of reading difficulty, it was important for Sarah to conduct additional assessments to gain a thorough understanding of Alyssa’s reading strengths and needs. During the first week of tutoring Alyssa, Sarah administered the Qualitative Reading Inventory-4 (QRI-4), the Elementary Reading Attitude Survey (ERAS), and a tutor-developed reading interest inventory. Sarah also interviewed Alyssa’s parents about her reading strengths and needs, and her reading habits and practices at home.

Alyssa’s performance on the QRI-4 revealed several areas of concern. Her score of nearly two grades below level on the QRI-4 word lists indicated that she might need help with word identification and decoding strategies. A close analysis of her oral reading errors indicated that she often attends only to the first letter of unfamiliar words. Because she lacks knowledge of how words work, she guesses at word pronunciations and does not seem to know whether her guesses are correct. Alyssa’s performance on the passage comprehension questions is consistent with this finding. She scored nearly two grades below level on this portion of the assessment and was able to answer only explicit, rather than implicit, comprehension questions correctly.

Alyssa’s ERAS results (overall score of 40) indicated that Alyssa has a relatively indifferent overall attitude toward reading. The reading interest inventory revealed that she has a keen interest in drawing and animals, particularly turtles and monkeys, with a general preference for nonfiction texts. These findings were consistent with comments made by her parents, who also indicated that she rarely reads outside of school.

Alyssa’s case scenario is commonplace among an estimated 20–25% of school-age children with poor academic achievement due, in part, to limited literacy skills. Her literacy problems appear to emanate
from multiple sources of difficulty related to cognitive, linguistic, and affective dimensions of literacy. These areas of concern are closely interrelated despite the fact that they may initially appear isolated.

In the following section, we share three practical guidelines illustrating how Sarah was able to conceptualize, organize, and monitor instruction for Alyssa, which enabled Sarah to address Alyssa's multiple sources of difficulty simultaneously. Sarah recently applied these guidelines as she tutored Alyssa for 60 minutes a day, four days a week, for five summer weeks. We believe these guidelines can and should be adapted for struggling readers in similar tutorial settings and contexts throughout the year.

**1. Use Multiple Assessment Data to Help Design and Guide Instruction**

In working with Alyssa, Sarah used information obtained from assessment data to help guide instruction. First, she targeted Alyssa's reading fluency by improving her sight word recognition, modeling fluent reading, and building her word formation knowledge in the context of familiar and new texts. Because Alyssa struggled with reading comprehension, Sarah built in specific vocabulary minilessons aimed at increasing conceptual understanding of words to help increase reading comprehension. Additionally, Sarah used Alyssa's interest in drawing to engage her in using art to make and check predictions, create concept maps, and make connections to what she reads to construct her own text understanding. Finally, Sarah provided time and opportunity to select and read high-quality narrative and informational texts inspired by Alyssa's interests in reading.

**2. Implement an Instructional Framework for Organizing and Managing Instruction**

In tutorial settings, when time can be limited, it is important to utilize a carefully studied instructional framework that should be closely adhered to and monitored. Existing instructional literacy frameworks share well-established instructional design features but vary somewhat in terms of purpose, instructional time, and delivery methods. In our university reading improvement clinic, we have been using an adapted version of Roller's (1998) tutoring framework, which consists of five components: (1) reading easy books, (2) reading a new book, (3) writing activity, (4) a minilesson, and (5) introduction of a new, more challenging book. In our adapted version of the framework, we made three important enhancements, which enabled Sarah to address Alyssa's multiple sources of difficulty concurrently.

First, in addition to reading selected narrative texts during the easy book and new book segments of the framework, Sarah incorporated grade-appropriate and high-interest informational text readings to help build Alyssa's word and world knowledge. Informational texts have been shown to accelerate and strengthen reading comprehension and enjoyment (Hiebert & Martin, 2009).

Second, during the writing, minilesson, and book reading discussion phases of the framework, Sarah incorporated strategies for Alyssa to engage in self-discovery and learning about reading. Because many at-risk children begin school with low language and literacy skills and less familiarity with literacy texts, tasks, and purposes, it is important for teachers and tutors to take time to allow them to "discover" important aspects of literacy on their own and to use these discoveries to construct understandings of what they read (Snow, Burns, & Griffin, 1998).

Third, in addition to the guided instruction occurring throughout the lessons, Sarah expected Alyssa to spend an extra 15 minutes daily reading voluntarily at home with parental guidance. Sarah helped Alyssa select narrative and informational books to read at home, which were subsequently used as familiar readings during the easy book segment of the lesson framework. Sarah taught Alyssa specific reading skills and strategies, but also felt it was important to provide time and opportunity to engage in self-selected texts and tasks at home (Hiebert & Martin, 2009).

Finally, because Alyssa had access to a cell phone and a computer at home, Sarah encouraged Alyssa to use these media to read, write, and communicate with Sarah outside of the tutoring time. Figure 1 shows a sample lesson that Sarah planned for and carried out with Alyssa using the adapted Roller (1998) framework.
Instead, she provided opportunities for Alyssa to read new texts containing similar words. Alyssa’s running records (98.5% accuracy on easy books) led Sarah to spend more time on enhancing Alyssa’s vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension strategies, while engaging her in discussions of self-selected narrative and informational texts.

Alyssa’s postassessment results indicated that she could independently read most texts at her grade level. Her reading accuracy and decoding abilities improved significantly. Sarah believes those improvements accounted for the improvement in Alyssa’s reading comprehension skills and overall maturity and motivation as a reader. Alyssa still needs work on higher level comprehension skills, as evidenced by her inability to correctly answer some of the implicit comprehension questions on new texts at her grade level. As Alyssa resumes school in the fall, Sarah advises her to keep reading or rereading her

### 3. Monitor Students’ Response to Instruction

A key aspect of Sarah’s success in helping Alyssa accelerate her reading is that Alyssa was always well prepared and ready for tutoring. Once Alyssa is engaged in literacy lessons, Sarah observes and pays close attention to how Alyssa responds to reading assessment and instruction, then makes instructional adjustments, a process that helps develop the supports necessary for continued reading growth.

After a few sessions of working with Alyssa, Sarah realized that Alyssa’s word decoding accuracy improved at an average rate of 2%–3% per session. At this rate, she will be ready to move to second-grade sight words within the following two sessions. By looking at the words Alyssa has decoded and the strategies she used, Sarah noted that Alyssa used multiple strategies to decode unfamiliar words, so Sarah no longer needed to focus on word attack strategies.

Instead, she provided opportunities for Alyssa to read new texts containing similar words. Alyssa’s running records (98.5% accuracy on easy books) led Sarah to spend more time on enhancing Alyssa’s vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension strategies, while engaging her in discussions of self-selected narrative and informational texts.

Alyssa’s postassessment results indicated that she could independently read most texts at her grade level. Her reading accuracy and decoding abilities improved significantly. Sarah believes those improvements accounted for the improvement in Alyssa’s reading comprehension skills and overall maturity and motivation as a reader. Alyssa still needs work on higher level comprehension skills, as evidenced by her inability to correctly answer some of the implicit comprehension questions on new texts at her grade level. As Alyssa resumes school in the fall, Sarah advises her to keep reading or rereading her

---

**Figure 1**

**Sample Lesson Framework Created for Alyssa, a Struggling Third Grader, by Her Tutor, Sarah**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Lesson component</th>
<th>Description and/or purpose</th>
<th>Lesson plan</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading easy texts</td>
<td>Familiar reading builds confidence by providing an opportunity to experience fluent reading.</td>
<td>Alyssa reads a familiar book while Sarah takes running records, noting patterns in miscues.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading new texts</td>
<td>New texts present challenges that promote exploration and learning of new skills, strategies, and concepts.</td>
<td>Alyssa reads a nonfiction text on turtles. She completes a picture walk through the book to introduce key vocabulary, draws turtles using a sketch-to-stretch activity, and writes a sentence to go with her drawing. She discusses with Sarah word attack strategies, applies them to unfamiliar words and meaningful contexts, and adds a turtle to her motivation chart for completing the book.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing</td>
<td>This activity is an opportunity to connect reading and writing and express one’s understanding of and feelings about texts read.</td>
<td>Alyssa creates a concept map in the shape of a turtle for the story, writes a summary sentence to go with the map, discusses with Sarah misconceptions about word and sentence structure, and edits written sentences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Minilesson</td>
<td>The minilesson introduces new and important skills, strategies, or concepts based on observed and documented needs.</td>
<td>Sarah and Alyssa engage in motivation, vocabulary, and comprehension with a “match the turtles” memory game. Alyssa learns how to use context clues to construct text meaning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading challenging texts</td>
<td>This component provides the student an opportunity to read high-interest but reasonably challenging texts while the tutor models fluent reading.</td>
<td>Alyssa reads a self-selected fictional book about monkeys and engages with Sarah in partner reading, stopping intermittently to discuss word meanings, new vocabulary, and comprehension. Sarah and Alyssa conclude the session by discussing the take-home reading assignment.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Lesson framework adapted from So What’s a Tutor to Do? by C.M. Roller, 1998, Newark, DE: International Reading Association.

*Names are pseudonyms.*
favorite books during the summer. She also recommends that Alyssa’s teachers work to increase awareness and use of reading comprehension strategies to enable her to read and understand increasingly complex reading materials.

**Concluding Remarks**

When asked to reflect on her preparation as a reading professional as a result of this supervised tutoring practicum, Sarah reported that it was intense and challenging, but exceedingly helpful in preparing her well for her roles as classroom teacher and reading specialist. She further noted that the guidelines described earlier, namely using data to guide instruction, addressing the needs of struggling readers through an instructional framework, and monitoring students’ response to reading assessment and instruction during lesson delivery, provided the supports and confidence necessary to help her better understand and address the strengths and needs of struggling readers, such as Alyssa, not just in tutorial settings but also in regular classroom settings.

We encourage teachers, paraprofessionals, parents, and volunteer or peer tutors to try these guidelines and explore alternative ways of conceptualizing and organizing instruction aimed at addressing the needs of struggling readers with the goal of accelerating their reading development.

**References**


Mokhtari teachers at Iowa State University, Ames, USA; e-mail kouider@gmail.com. Hutchison teaches at Iowa State University; e-mail amyhutch@iastate.edu. Edwards teaches at Michigan State University, Lansing, USA; e-mail edwards6@msu.edu.

The department welcomes reader comments. Kouider Mokhtari teaches at Iowa State University, Ames, USA; e-mail kouider@gmail.com. Patricia A. Edwards teaches at Michigan State University, Lansing, USA; e-mail edwards6@msu.edu.