Recorded Books = Remarkable Reading Gains

How to help kids break through the reading barrier

By Dr. Marie Carbo

Ten years ago, I taught learning disabled students in an elementary school, pullout resource program. Most of my students were either nonreaders or they were reading years below their grade level. After months of experimenting with every kind of reading material I could lay my hands on, I discovered a way of recording books for them that produced remarkable reading gains.

During the next few years I refined the recorded book method. When I trained other teachers to record, many wrote to me to tell me about their outstanding results—which were similar to those that occurred with my students. Those results are not surprising, as research strongly indicates that when a child’s Reading Style Inventory (RSI) printout recommended the recorded book method, often jumps of two and three years in reading comprehension took place in three to ten months! (See EY April ’84, and end of this article for a description of the Reading Style Inventory.) A little later I’ll describe how to record the books. Right now, my mind is filled with the memories of that first, exciting year when student after student broke through the reading barrier.

It happened during a brief, six-week period from mid-April to the end of May. At that time, I was recording different books nightly for every child in my pro-
gram. It was exhausting, but well worth the time. Those same children who just a few weeks before using the recorded books had been stumbling and agonizing over the simplest words, gained an average of eight months in word recognition in those six weeks!

Tommy's Great Leap

The greatest gain was made by Tommy, a sixth grader with an I.Q. of 114 who read on a first grade level. No matter what I did to de-stigmatize my program, Tommy was so embarrassed about his reading problem that he would sink in and out of the resource room when no one else was walking down the hallway. He wanted me to record a chapter of Charlotte's Web for him. As you probably know, Charlotte's Web is about a fifth-grade level book. I didn’t believe that Tommy would be able to read the book, but he was so turned off to reading, and so frightened of anything that had to do with reading (his body actually shook when he tried to read), I was willing to attempt just about anything that might help him. Not only did Tommy read the portions of Charlotte's Web back to me that I had recorded, but he read them flawlessly, smoothly and with excellent expression. The first time that momentous event occurred, I had a difficult time keeping the tears from welling in my eyes.

For six weeks, Tommy listened to a new recording daily. I recorded at a slow pace for him since the gap between his reading level and the book was so large. And I recorded very little—only about two minutes on one tape side. He would look at the words and listen to the tape about three times, and then read the recorded portion back to me. The entire procedure usually required no more than 15 minutes daily. The result: In just six weeks Tommy gained 1½ years in word recognition!

I thought that perhaps Tommy's rapid and sustained reading success might be something of a phenomenon, but in years to come I learned that when my recorded book method matched a child's reading style, the phenomenon was likely to be repeated. Many teachers have reported similar results. After using tape recorded books for just a few days, Janet Davis found that her meek, fearful students became proud of their ability to read fluently. She sent me this wonderful note: "They come in each morning clamoring for their turn at the tape recorder! The most exciting part to me was the immediately noticeable improvement in their reading ability...The boys also enjoy sharing a page or two...After every listening they’re showing off their skill! They’re so proud."

After using tape recorded books with her handicapped students for just a few weeks, Lois LaShell wrote: "I am so utterly thrilled with the results that it is worth every minute of the time. The kids love it—especially the little ones. Of course, they were all nonreaders and now all but two are reading!"

A few months later, Lois told me that her poor readers had become really excited about reading and that many were gaining rapidly in reading ability. She jotted this down for me: "As it is, I can't keep up with the recordings. The kids go faster than I—they are becoming more and more excited about 'how many' books they can read and some are moving way ahead in jumps."

The Carbo Recorded Book Method: What It Is, and Why It Works

The recorded book method is a special way of recording books in small, sequential sections so the printed and spoken words are synchronized for the reader. For the best results, you will need to adjust four, distinct variables when recording—you pace, phrasing, expression, and the amount you record. If done correctly, your recordings will help students to integrate the rate, rhythm, and natural flow of language so necessary for good comprehension and will enable many students to read books well above their reading level.

For many young children, and poor readers, there's a substantial time lag between when they see and say a word. That lag produces laborious, slow reading that make comprehension all but impossible. It's simply difficult for students to recall what a passage is about when they have to expend so much effort to figure out each word. In effect, the recording does what the

child is not yet able to do naturally; it verbalizes the printed words with the correct pace, phrasing and expression. As a result, students make fewer reading errors and the possibility of forming incorrect reading patterns is diminished.

Best of all, you don't have to record dull, simple, reading materials to develop a student's sight vocabulary. (In fact, words presented within high-interest contexts tend to be easier to learn and retain than words presented in isolation or within a dull context). Since each student can decide the number of times to listen to a recording and when to read aloud, the child is in control of his or her own learning.

Recorded books seem to become the raw material—the data—from which the brain can extract the patterns of printed language. Those patterns also appear to be applied to new words without any apparent effort on the part of the child.

The reading styles of many primary youngsters and poor readers match the recorded book method because it is ideal for global children who need to discover phonic patterns naturally, within a comprehensible context, without the imposition of phonic rules. After global youngsters have read many high-interest books, enjoyed them and can recognize a few hundred words on sight, decoding work can be started—provided it's needed. Remember, every student does not need phonics to become a good reader. Children need to be sufficiently auditory and analytic to succeed with a decoding approach. If they aren't, continued reading with recorded books will increase their reading ability and enjoyment much more than phonics training will.

Selecting Books to Record

No one loves to read just for the sake of reading. We may "love to settle down with a good book"—one that we enjoy—but no one wants to read a dull, badly written book. A so-called love of reading is always dependent on these two important factors. First, the process must be sufficiently effortless so the individual can concentrate on what he or she is reading. Second, the material must be of great interest to the reader.

Continued
When recording books for a youngster, these four factors deserve your consideration: 1) quality of the writing and the student’s interest; 2) interest; 3) language comprehension level; 4) reading level.

Quality of the Writing: To select well-written children’s books, your school librarian and also lists of award-winning books can be helpful. If a book seems interesting, read a portion and check to see if imaginative language is used, if there is a clear purpose for reading established by the author, and whether the author captures the interest of the reader almost immediately.

Student Interest: Select books to record based on your students’ interests. During a period of seven years of experimentation with recorded books, I discovered that many youngsters made the slowest progress in basal readers. This was particularly true at the primer and preprimer levels. As soon as students began to listen to high-interest, recorded storybooks, their word retention improved dramatically in direct proportion to their interest in the book. After the development of an initial sight vocabulary, students of all ages made the most rapid gains with books close to their language comprehension level, which usually was far above their reading level.

Student Language Comprehension and Reading Level: Most young children and poor readers are assigned so-called “high-interest,” low-readability materials. Seldom is the student’s language-comprehension level considered although it’s a powerful factor in reading level. Select books to record that at least approach the child’s spoken language ability. For example, suppose you were choosing books to record for two average youngsters—Joe, a fourth grader, and Tom in the sixth grade. Both read on a third-grade reading level. You would select a more difficult book for Tom because he is interested in and capable of understanding, sixth-grade-level vocabulary and concepts.

To judge whether you have chosen the right level book for a youngster, use these rules of thumb. Students should not be able to read a book fluently before listening to the book tape—that is what the book tapes will enable them to do. After two or three listenings to a book tape, students should be able to read the passage back smoothly, with no more than two or three errors.

Selection Guide
1. Students Who Have Attained At Least A Second-Grade Reading Level: If the child’s language-comprehension level is about two or more years higher than his or her reading level, try recording books that are one to 1½ years above the youngster’s reading level. If the two levels are approximately similar, or the language-comprehension level is fewer than two years above the child’s reading level, record books that are about six months above the student’s reading level. If not, record books that are just a few months above.
2. Students Who Read Below A Second-Grade Level: For such youngsters, record books that are about six months above their reading level, provided their language-comprehension level is at least one year higher than their reading level. If not, record books that are just a few months above their reading level.
3. Non-Readers: Begin with stories created by the children. Either have them dictate short paragraphs and then make recordings of them; or ask the youngsters to talk directly into a tape recorder and later you write down what is on the tape. To store children’s recordings and make them easily accessible, tape or paste a youngster’s story and drawing inside a folder. Both the folder and accompanying tape cassette should have the same design or number (see how to code in my next recorded book article appearing in December EY). Record simple storybooks that have: a) descriptive pictures b) about five to ten words on each page and c) words repeated sufficiently so the youngster can commit them to memory.

How to Record Books to Produce The Greatest Reading Gains

To be most effective, recorded books should be above the student’s reading level and on, close to, or even some-

What higher than the youngster’s language-comprehension level.

The simple key is this:

If the gap between the student’s reading and comprehension levels is small, record approximately five minutes of a story on one tape side at a fairly normal pace, with natural expression and phrasing. If the gap is large, use a slower pace, fewer words to a phrase, exaggerate your expression, and record much less—about two minutes.

Here are my three golden rules of recording:
1. Books should be recorded in very small segments because most youngsters will need to listen to a tape side more than once to be able to read the portion back fluently. That is why only about one to five minutes should be recorded on each tape side. Therefore, a 15-page picture storybook might require four tape sides, while a longer book might take ten.
2. Record at a fairly slow pace to enable your students to absorb the words they hear. The short, natural phrases translate the printed page into meaningful segments. The pauses are crucial because they allow the brain to take in and sort the text, and help to increase both comprehension and word recognition.
3. Record with good expression because that, too, aids memory. Research indicates that speech stimuli—such as moaning, crying, coughing, laughing—and the melody or inflection of the voice stimulate the right hemisphere of the brain and increase retention.

How To Record For A Group

Most groups will have a wide range of reading abilities. “When recording for a group of students, add about half a year to the lowest reading level in the group and at least 1½ years to the highest level. Then record books within that range. For example, suppose a fifth grade has reading levels from 3.0 to 6.8 Then books ranging from 3.5

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Step-By-Step: How to Record the Books

1. Set aside a block of quiet time to record.
2. Decide on the book you will record and code the tapes accordingly (see coding techniques in upcoming December EY).
3. Speak into the microphone from a distance of approximately eight inches.
4. In general, use the same naturally expressive voice you would use if you were reading to one child.
5. Convey your interest in the book through your voice. Let the child feel your enthusiasm.
6. Begin by reading the story title, pausing, and then telling students the page to which they should turn. Always pause long enough so the youngster has ample time to turn pages and look at pictures.
7. End each tape with, "That ends this recording. Please rewind the tape for the next listener."
8. Tell the student when to turn the page. As you begin each story, say, "Turn to page ______." Slowly reduce the cues until you need only pause, state the page number, and pause again. It's important to work up to omitting the words "Turn to page..." because this interruption tends to distract the listener from the story.
9. Since the story is all important, your voice should be softer when giving cues to the student than it is when you are reading.
10. Phrasing is extremely important. Read the story in logical sections. It's the way you phrase that will help youngsters understand the passage and increase their reading comprehension.
11. If you think a word may be unfamiliar to students, give it space by pausing slightly before and after it. That will give youngsters more time to look at it, absorb, and retain the word.
12. Read slowly so that students can visually track the words they hear, but not so slowly they become bored.

13. Teach students with visual perception problems who lose their place easily on the page, to follow the recording by placing a finger under the words they hear; show them how to use an index card to keep their place.

Since the poorer readers may want to sample some books three and four years above their reading level, the pace should be somewhat slow and the recordings brief (four to six minutes). In that way, poor readers can attempt some difficult books, and good readers can complete more than one tape side at a sitting if they are able.

Sample Recording

The following excerpt (see Fig. 1) is part of an actual book tape recorded for a fifth-grade group, reading on a third grade level. The sweeping lines indicate the phrasing used on the recording. Students read from the actual book and did not see the lines.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group Reading Level:</th>
<th>Approximately 3.5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Book: CHARLOTTE'S WEB, Estimated RL: 5.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gap: One year, five months</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How to Record: PACE: slow, about 75 wpm</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PHRASING: about 2-5 words per phrase</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EXPRESSION: exaggerated LENGTH: about 2 minutes</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

CHARLOTTE'S WEB (pause)

Turn to page 77. (longer pause)

Charlotte has done something very special with her web. Something she thinks will save Wilbur's life. Let's find out if her plan seems to be working. Page 77 (pause)

On foggy mornings, Charlotte's Web was truly a thing of beauty. This morning each thin strand was decorated with dozens of tiny beads of water.

The web glistened and made a pattern of loveliness and mystery, like a delicate veil.

(E.B. White, p.77, 1952)

Notice that there was a long pause after the students were told to turn to page 77. That allowed the youngsters to turn to the page, look at any pictures, and find page 77.

After recording one story, allow a few students to listen to your tape. Check to see if your directions are followed easily, if interest is maintained, and if the youngsters have time to turn pages, look at pictures, and track the printed material visually. You may want to practice reading each book aloud before actually recording it.

Recording books for students does take time, but the method has produced remarkable reading gains of as much as a few years in just a few month's time—when the youngster's individual reading style matches the technique. See reading styles information below. After you become an expert, you can train volunteers to make the recordings. To summarize, consider the following when recording a book for a student: a) the youngster's interest in the book b) the maximum phrase length the child can assimilate c) the highest reading rate the youngster can follow comfortably d) the amount of expression required to maintain interest and increase word retention e) the amount of material that should be recorded. Good luck and stick with it—you will be amazed by the results!

P.S.—In the DECEMBER issue of EARLY YEARS/K-8 I'll show you how to organize and code the books and tapes so that your recorded book program runs smoothly—and answer the five most most commonly asked questions about The Carbo Recorded Book Method.

References


To order a special specimen set of the RSI for EARLY YEARS readers, send $11.50 to: Learning Research Associates, Box 39, Roslyn Hts, NY 11577. This specimen set includes the RSI MANUAL, RSI test and answer sheet, sample RSI printouts, RSI RESEARCH SUPPLEMENT, and FREE processing of one child's answer sheet.