



**Wade McJacobs**

(wademcj@gmail.com), an ILA member since 2004, taught special education for 31 years and is the author of two self-published books: *The Read Through It Strategy: Building Confidence First Then Comprehension in Secondary Struggling Readers* and *Dare to Read: Improving Your Reading Speed and Skills*.

# FOCUSING ON **IDEAS**

## **How idea units can improve comprehension and build confidence**

By **Wade McJacobs**

*m*any secondary struggling readers have self-identified as “poor readers” since grade school, and they continue to do so into adulthood. An effective reading program must work to build the confidence as well as the skills of these struggling readers to have long-term effects.

When facing challenges in an assigned passage, these struggling readers learn to attack the challenges with skill, but all too often as a chore. Frequently, they do not experience the joy and magic of reading.

Activities in remedial classes often focus on word building and comprehension strategies that teach how to ask questions about a section of a passage. Unfortunately, for the struggling student, the challenges within a passage are often many. Which strategy should they employ first? How do they decide?

I contend that students bring more to their reading than we as educators acknowledge and they need an exercise that helps them pace their reading so that they feel some success while they are reading. What I call *idea units* allow them to develop comprehension one step at a time, which builds confidence to continue on with the text.

### When the word is too small

In grade school, words are fascinating because they are doorways into the world of reading. By middle school, however, words alone are just frustrating. After third grade, sounding out words is a chore and not fun.

Of greater concern, however, is that focusing on individual words distracts from the interesting aspects of the text—the ideas. However, students can get a sense of the text even when missing some words.

Imagine Kathryn, a student struggling with several words throughout a passage. As instructed, she spent little effort sounding out troublesome words. She described her performance by saying, “I messed up, but I got it.” She confidently and successfully completed comprehension questions. She got the ideas by reading through the troublesome words instead of getting stuck in sounding them out. She grew in confidence.

### When the sentence is too large

Teachers are very familiar with the practice of chunking instruction to avoid overwhelming students. For a struggling reader, a single sentence can be overwhelming. There could be a word that is difficult to pronounce, a concept that is new, and/or a phrase that combines ideas.

Struggling readers, however, often have difficulty managing all that is happening within a single sentence. It requires the use of many skills at one time: using syllables, substituting synonyms, using previous knowledge, etc.

**Comprehension requires context, and natural breaks in a sentence provide enough context for the mind to create an idea even when a word is not read correctly.**

In the Jack London story *The King of Mazy May*, there is a sentence that reads, “Then it curved into the creek, poising perilously on one runner.” Rarely did my students correctly read this sentence. Yet nearly every student could describe what was happening with this sled.

Hunter, another student, was reading this sentence about Ben Franklin: “He attached a wire to act as a lightning catcher.” Hunter read, “He attached a wire to catch the...,” and then he stopped and tried to correct himself knowing that he had misread the sentence. I asked him what he was going to say, and he replied, “He attached a wire to catch the lightning.” Clearly, he understood what the passage meant, but because he had a habit of focusing on accuracy, he stumbled. His frustration was more apparent to him than his successful comprehension.

But Hunter understood. He should feel happy with his performance. His habit of focusing on correctness interfered with his reading and with his confidence. These habits of correctness were effective when young. But secondary students need new habits that highlight ideas created as they read.

### Idea units and reading through it

Fortunately, the English language is structured in such a way that there are natural breaking points to help focus on units of comprehension. We can avoid being overwhelmed by allowing our minds to be alert to these natural breaking points. I repeat with pausing after each idea unit: We can avoid being overwhelmed [pause] by allowing

our minds to be alert [pause] to these natural breaking points.

Comprehension requires context, and natural breaks in a sentence provide enough context for the mind to create an idea even when a word is not read correctly. The brain wants comprehension, so it will fill in gaps.

Kirsten struggled with the word “companies,” so I said, “Read through it.” The next time the word arose, she read it perfectly. Without referencing that word, I asked her how she felt about her reading. Her response, with a big smile of accomplishment, “I got that word, didn’t I?”

Tanya used the habit of “reading through it” when she came across the word “anxiously.” When facing the word a second time, she read it perfectly with no hesitation. Afterward, Tanya declared, “My brain figured it out while I was reading.” She allowed the context surrounding the word to assist not only with comprehension but also with pronunciation.

Idea units provide the opportunity to focus on ideas in a sentence. The students are not always correct, but they are engaged rather than frustrated. It is a matter of which habit to teach and develop. The old habit of accurate reading can be replaced with one of mindful reading about ideas. For secondary students, the old habit is stigmatizing; the new habit honors their thinking.

The new habit of using idea units and “reading through” challenges requires practice, but the practice is simple. The reader simply needs to exaggerate the pauses for comprehension to develop. The brain seeks comprehension, but we must give it the pause to allow it to happen. ■