

Executive summary

The project

REACH is a targeted reading support programme designed to improve the reading comprehension and accuracy of pupils with reading difficulties in Years 7 and 8. It is based on research by the Centre for Reading and Language at York and is delivered by specially trained teaching assistants (TAs). This evaluation tested two versions of REACH, one based on the original REACH intervention, and another adapted to include greater focus on language comprehension. In both versions, pupils received three one-to-one 35 minute sessions each week for 20 weeks. Pupils were taken out of other lessons (typically not English lessons) for the sessions and so this evaluation assesses the effect of the interventions combined with more time focused on literacy, compared with standard provision.

The impact of the interventions on the reading skills of 287 pupils in 27 schools was tested using a randomised controlled trial. Schools in areas close to Leeds were recruited to the trial in 2013. Pupils identified as having relatively poor reading skills were randomly allocated to the standard REACH intervention, the language comprehension version, or standard provision. In response to slow initial recruitment, the trial was implemented in two phases. A process evaluation was carried out involving a survey of teaching assistants and interviews with staff from participating schools.

Key conclusions

1. Both REACH interventions had a positive effect on the reading skills of the pupils in the trial. These effects are unlikely to have occurred by chance.
2. Pupils receiving the language comprehension version of the intervention experienced the equivalent of about six months of additional progress on average. For pupils receiving the standard version the figure was four months.
3. The evaluation did not provide any evidence that the interventions improved reading comprehension in particular, as opposed to other skills such as word recognition.
4. Staff reported that the interventions improved literacy, reading ability and confidence. Staff views were more positive in schools where the interventions were delivered by experienced teaching assistants, supported by senior staff, and allocated a dedicated space for delivery.
5. Teaching assistants sometimes found the interventions challenging to deliver. In particular, many said they were not confident delivering the one-to-one sessions even after training, and some found that the reading comprehension elements sometimes failed to hold pupils' attention.

Security rating

Findings from this study have moderate to low security. The study was designed as a single randomised controlled trial, which aimed to compare the progress of pupils who received the interventions with that of similar pupils who did not. However, the original design had to be changed because of delays in recruiting schools, meaning that the trial was run in two separate phases. The trial was also smaller in size than expected because not as many pupils were recruited as planned and because 29.6% of the pupils did not complete all the tests at the end of the project.

The process evaluation also suggested that some participating TAs used some of the REACH techniques they had learned when teaching pupils from the comparison group. These pupils were not supposed to receive the REACH interventions, and the fact that they did makes it harder to estimate the size of the impact accurately.

Results

Both REACH interventions had a positive effect on the reading skills and reading accuracy of the pupils in the trial. Pupils receiving the language comprehension version of the intervention experienced the equivalent of about six months of additional progress. For pupils receiving the standard version the figure was four months. These effects are unlikely to have occurred by chance.

However, the impact of the interventions on pupils' reading comprehension in particular, measured using a combination of specific reading comprehension tests, was much smaller. These effects are also more likely to have occurred by chance. It is therefore not possible to say with confidence that the REACH interventions improve reading comprehension. This is true even for the intervention which had greater focus on language comprehension. The process evaluation also revealed that teaching assistants generally reported that the language comprehension component was the most difficult to deliver and that in some cases pupils became bored by it. It was suggested that it could be more varied and segmented into shorter pieces.

The process evaluation revealed a number of areas where schools felt the programme could be improved. Of the teaching assistants interviewed for the process evaluation, many said they did not feel confident in delivering the intervention after the initial five days of training without ongoing support and most agreed that more focus on the practical elements of delivering the interventions would have been helpful. In practical terms, the 35-minute long sessions were not well matched with standard one hour school lessons. The evaluation also suggests that some lead-in time for schools is valuable. Schools in the second phase, which had more notice of the interventions' introduction, were noticeably more prepared than those in the first phase.

Although the overall evaluation results are promising, it is important to note the concerns over the security of these findings. This includes the phasing of the trial, the fact that not all pupils completed the tests and some differences in the characteristics of pupils in the treatment and control groups.

How much does it cost?

The programme is relatively cheap to buy, but requires significant delivery time from teaching assistants. The cost of the materials for each intervention is £486 per teaching assistant. The cost of a trainer for five days was £2,500. This trainer could train a number of TAs and so this cost could be split between a number of schools. If the training were held at a hotel or training centre, as opposed to a school, there would be an estimated additional cost of £28 to £35 per day for each TA. Each TA could then deliver the intervention repeatedly. In terms of staff time, the intervention requires teaching assistants to deliver three 35 minute one-to-one sessions with each pupil involved for 20 weeks.

Summary of the effects of REACH on Reading Skills

Group	Effect Size (95% confidence interval)	Estimated months' progress	Security rating	Cost
REACH original vs standard provision	0.329 (0.135; 0.523)	4	2 out of 5	£££££
REACH language comprehension vs standard provision	0.506 (0.336; 0.677)	6	2 out of 5	£££££

Note: See notes to Table 11 for more details on how the impact estimates were calculated. See the 'cost' section in the 'impact evaluation' chapter for more detail on the EEF cost rating.