

Is MultiLit like Spaghetti Bolognese?

Kevin Wheldall

When I was a small boy growing up in Derby in the UK, Heinz Spaghetti Bolognese was available from the local shops in tins. I have no idea whether it is still available or whether it was ever available in Australia but that is not the point. The tins proudly displayed the name on the label and, for all I knew, what was in the tin was, in fact, Spaghetti Bolognese. I didn't like it much. I thought it was quite yucky, in fact.

Fast forward about ten years or so until I was in my late teens and started going (very occasionally) to restaurants where I found this dish on the menu of a (to me then) very posh Italian restaurant. I forget what it was that prompted me to eschew gammon and chips with pineapple in favour of Spaghetti Bolognese but it was a revelation to me. It was good; very good. And it bore no resemblance to the yucky stuff in the tin!

And so I learned that things are not always what they seem and not to be fooled by what it might say on the label...

Patience exhausted, you must be thinking what on earth is he rambling on about now ...? "Bear with, bear with" as Miranda (Hart) and her friends would say.

My point is this. Just because you are told that your child is receiving instruction in MultiLit does not necessarily mean that they are. (A similar problem exists with Reading Recovery where it appears to have become the generic name for any remedial reading program de jour, even including Year 6 students, rather than the specific program designed explicitly for Year 1 students.) So when is MultiLit instruction not really MultiLit? When is it 'Clayton's' MultiLit? When, in fact, is it merely the tinned version ...? Here are some helpful ways of telling whether you are getting the real McCoy.

Content

Most of our MultiLit programs consist of several components. The Reading Tutor Program (RTP), for example, for older low-progress readers, comprises three elements: MultiLit Word Attack Skills (or phonics instruction); MultiLit Sight Words (to teach some very common words quickly to allow access to real texts); and MultiLit Reinforced Reading (to provide practice in generalising the skills learned into the reading of real books). None of these components are optional. You cannot just pick 'n' mix the bits from the program that you fancy teaching. All three components are important, not to say essential, if older low-progress readers are to begin to make good progress in learning to read.

A report on how MultiLit was being implemented in state schools as part of the National Partnerships funding scheme was commissioned by the NSW Department of Education and Communities. The consultants who wrote the report found that whereas the vast majority of schools deploying MultiLit implemented the Word Attack Skills component, only about 70% were also using the Sight Words and Reinforced Reading components.

The highest degree of inconsistency in implementation was found with Reinforced Reading. Most MultiLit Coordinators and tutors said they usually did Reinforced Reading, but a number said there was often not enough time in the session to do this component fully, or even at all. A small caveat is needed here: not all students will need MultiLit Sight Words or may need to do it for only a short time because they already know most of the Sight Words. The placement test will determine this.



Take away message: All components of the program must be taught for it to be effective (except Sight Words for some students who already know them).

Session length and frequency

The same survey reported that only 16% of schools were implementing MultiLit RTP for the recommended 35-40 minutes per session. A further 19% delivered it for just under the recommended time, 30-35 minutes, whereas 42% spent only 20-30 minutes, and 23% less than 20 minutes.

Ideally, the program should be delivered daily. Of the teachers surveyed, only just over half (55%) delivered the program for at least four times per week; 42% delivered it three times per week, and 3% only twice per week.

We recommend that older low-progress readers need a minimum of 35-40 minutes of instruction per day for at least four days per week and that this should be continued for at least two terms, for good results to be realised. Clearly, this recommendation is frequently "more honoured in the breach than the observance".*

Take away message: The program should be taught for a minimum of 35-40 minutes daily for at least two terms.

Training

A teacher attending one of our MultiLit training sessions, but who had been teaching the MultiLit RTP in school for some time already, was once heard to remark: "Oh, I get it now. Previously, I was just testing the kids everyday, not teaching them." True story.

One of the biggest mistakes we made when we first released the RTP was not to require training for those who purchased the program. Similar programs we have subsequently released, such as MiniLit, include mandatory training for purchasers. This is now our standard practice.

Far too frequently, training in MultiLit RTP has taken the form of 'Chinese Whispers', a fine children's game but not an appropriate model for training teachers and others

to use carefully designed instructional programs in the way in which they were intended. If (with luck) Teacher A attends the course and then passes on what s/he believes to be the essential content, together with their own spin, to Teacher B, who passes it on to Teacher C and so on, then the key messages are highly likely to be distorted along the way. Now, MultiLit RTP is a robust program, and it has been shown to be highly effective for teaching older low-progress readers for 20 years. But it has to be delivered as designed to be optimally effective.

We can guarantee that the MultiLit programs delivered by our own, carefully trained, staff in our own literacy centres will be presented exactly as the programs were designed. We can offer similar guarantees about the programs delivered by our staff working in centres for which we are commissioned to provide the literacy instruction (in Exodus Tutorial Centres, for example). But, with the best will in the world, we cannot guarantee that MultiLit programs provided by others will be delivered with the same degree of fidelity. This is much more likely to be the case, however, if the teachers or tutors have been specifically trained in how to deliver the programs by our MultiLit training department.

Take away message: *The program must be taught by a teacher or other who has been specifically trained in how to deliver the program effectively.*

Monitoring

How can we tell if our low-progress readers receiving MultiLit instruction are actually improving? Anecdotal reports are notoriously unreliable. It is quite possible that teachers and parents, and even the students themselves, may believe that progress is being made when in fact there has been little or no change in performance. Liking or believing in a program is no substitute for hard evidence of efficacy and that means collecting data on performance.

It is good practice to test reading performance before and after the student has received instruction, at the end of every one or two terms, for example. But do we really want to wait a whole term to determine whether the child is making progress or not? Low-progress readers need to make accelerated progress if they are ever going to catch up with their classroom peers and they have no time to waste on ineffective instruction. This is why we at MultiLit strongly recommend more frequent, regular monitoring of reading performance.

To this end we have developed two measures of reading performance: The Wheldall Assessment of Reading Passages (or WARP) for older low-progress readers and the Wheldall Assessment of Reading Lists (or WARL) for young struggling readers. We use these measures on a weekly or fortnightly basis to check that our students are benefitting from the instruction they are receiving. Typically, we plot the results on a simple graph so that we can see at a glance whether students are making good progress as shown by a rising line on the graph. A graph showing no upward trend (or 'flatlining') suggests that some sort of modification to program delivery is needed; greater intensity of instruction, for example.

Take away message: *Students' reading performance should be monitored regularly to track progress and to ensure that real progress is being made.*

To sum up

To make Spaghetti Bolognese that is worth eating requires that first-class quality ingredients are prepared by a cook who knows what they are doing, who leaves nothing out and who cooks for the correct amount of time, checking the sauce for taste and consistency throughout the process. The same may be said to be true of effective reading instruction using our MultiLit programs. Bon appétit.

*Yes, I know that Shakespeare meant something rather different by this statement, but it has come to mean this in everyday parlance.

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