

## The downsides of a successful reading intervention



Gila Carter  
(gila.carter@wits.ac.za)



## Background



English reading under-preparedness is well researched in South Africa (Kilfoil, 2008; Mbambo, 2008; Nel and Nel, 2009; Roberts & Klamen, 2010).

Admission to university in itself is a signal to students of success yet progression through their degree may be hazardous.

Reading proficiency is essential for students, is an acquired skill requiring incremental vocabulary building and practice that may have to be nurtured even at university level (Andor, 2012; Bharuthram, 2006, 2012; Kilfoil, 2008).

Attitude to reading matters and students need to be nurtured from where they are in relation to the context of their studies (Ryan, 2010).

## Read On! programme



Read On! is a computer-based English reading, comprehension and writing programme that offers:

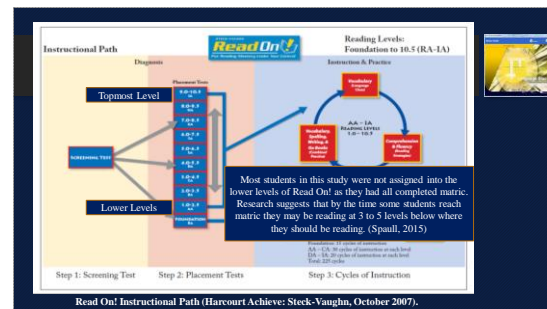
- Ten structured learning levels the lowest RA, then AA, BA, CA, DA, EA, FA, HA, GA and IA being the topmost level;
- A vocabulary of almost 4000 words;
- Some 420 instructional lessons;
- Over 1 000 hours of computer-based practice and exercises in reading, listening, vocabulary, grammar and writing.

## Read On! assessment



Read On! offers Reading Strategies, Grammar Clues and a Writing component with comprehension, spelling and cloze type questions, fill in the missing word, complete the sentence, flash words, individual writing practice and a comprehensive glossary.

- Initial placement assessment and pre- and post-tests at all levels.
- Assessment set at a pass of 80% with a reading speed of 100 w.p.m.
- Immediate results feedback to students.
- A facilitator attended all activities to offer assistance where required.



## Methods



A questionnaire was administered to obtain the experiences and perceptions of fifty-six repeating students from different years of study who had practiced in Read On!

Responses were received from thirty-nine students (70%).



## Sample sentence at Medical School



Interestingly, clarithromycin-mediated inhibition of the production of penumolysin was observed not only with macrolide-susceptible strains of the pneumococcus, but also with macrolide-resistant strains which harboured either the ribosomal methylase (*erm(B)* gene)- or efflux pump (*mef* gene)- based mechanism of macrolide resistance, supporting the contention that macrolides possess a seemingly unique profile of complementary therapeutic activities.

## Qualitative results

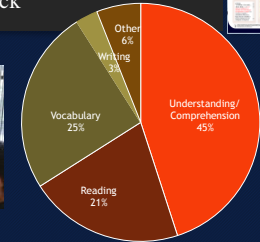
This paper draws on students' responses to a questionnaire (thematically analysed) to gain insight into student perceptions of Read On!

The majority of the students reported three key aspects that they felt were useful. I have called these the "Upsides".

Students also reported back suggestions for improvements to the reading intervention which I call the "Downsides".



## Students reported feedback

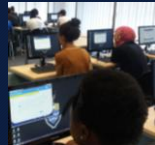


## UPSIDES



Students reported that practicing in Read On!:

- Improved their English vocabulary
- They enjoyed reading more
- Increased their understanding, comprehension and analysis skills



## Vocabulary gains - student responses



- "[Read On!] helps you learn new words and their meanings."
- "Keeps you focussed." "The glossary is very helpful."
- "I learned that one word can have multiple meanings ..."
- "Read On! improved my vocabulary drastically!"
- "With English being a second language ... programmes such as Read On! help when studying alone."
- "For someone who is already capable of reading, speaking and writing English it extended my vocabulary, improved my speech and allowed me to articulate better."

## Reading attitude - student responses



- "Reading can be fun!" "It helped me to focus."
- "Read On! is a great programme especially for people using English as a 2nd or 3rd language."
- "The language section was very insightful and had clear instructions."
- "This programme should be compulsory for every Health Science student with English as a second language."
- "It improved my reading speed." "I learned how to read faster."

### Understanding/comprehension - student responses



- “Read On! Helped with the understanding of English Vocabulary, spelling, linking words in reading and interpretation of work.”
- “Read On! helped me to be able to articulate ... organise my thoughts better with more appropriate words.”
- “Read On! taught me how to comprehend and analyse things better.”
- I have learned to analyse a piece of work I have read and link it to everyday personal experience.”
- “It helps with extracting information and making conclusions.”

### DOWNSIDES



Students reported that practicing in Read On!:



- Time constraints
- Read On! was not in the timetable/accessible
- The readings were too general and not discipline specific

### Time constraints - student responses



- “There must be more time allocated to Read On! Or students must do more in their own spare time.”
- “They should have more flexible times.”
- “The programme should be initiated in the first year of study for medical programmes.”
- “Being able to do Read On! in free time.”
- “Two hours per session ... is tiring and ... should be broken down.”

### Accessibility issues - student responses



- “Make Read On! available on the Wits website for individuals who can work independently.”
- “Practice sessions were only for repeating students.”
- “The programme must be made available on all computers on all campuses.”
- “Made available on the Wits website.”
- “If it [Read On!] was implemented for first years it would be a better foundation for them rather than waiting for someone to repeat [a year].”

### Context - student responses



- “It is an interesting programme but it does not help with study methods.”
- “Add more challenging language practice exercises.”
- “Include... anatomical terms that can be useful in medical school studies.”
- “The Comprehension section [writing] does not mark or give feedback which makes it a bit unimportant.”
- “If used in Health Science it must be integrated with medical terms.”

### In Summary



Students feedback in the questionnaire was direct and to the point: Even though the intervention helps with vocabulary building, reading and comprehension/understanding, there are time constraints, availability issues and the Read On! is not context specific to the Health Sciences.

Our job is to listen.

These results may be useful for future design and development of a reading intervention that can meet the needs of students in a Faculty of Health Sciences.

## Recommendations



- An Open Education Resource **freely available** to all students can help to level the playing field and motivate independent learning.
- Development of a Faculty of Health Sciences' appropriate academic English reading intervention that includes relevant medical **terminology, discipline-specific terms, readings and resources**.
- Furthermore, developing a **English vocabulary/glossary intervention with discipline-specific medical terms** could also assist students.

## THANK YOU



"Knowledge is not intended to fill minds. It is intended to open them."  
(Siemens, 2006, p.13)