



# Developing Word Knowledge Within Tape Assisted and/or Other Audio Recorded Reading Programmes

Dr Keith Greaney  
Massey University

## ABSTRACT

Tape Assisted Reading Programmes (TARPs), and more recently, other forms of audio recorded stories, have been used in New Zealand schools to help students with reading difficulties. Many claims are made about the positive effects of such programmes on general reading ability and progress. However, this paper, informed by research, states that such programmes may also have particular limitations for students with severe decoding problems because merely listening to audio-recordings offers limited opportunities or incentives to develop specific word identification strategies. Some of these limitations are discussed and an activity that encourages the development of word knowledge and decoding strategies within such programmes is presented.

## Position paper

**Keywords:** *Audio-assisted reading, reading difficulties, teaching decoding strategies*

## INTRODUCTION

While many stories are now presented on CDs (rather than on tapes) there is still a place for audio-recorded stories in the classroom. Using Tape Assisted Reading Programmes (TARPs) and/or similar audio-recorded stories to assist the development of fluency and confidence in poor readers has been a popular addition to many teachers' reading programmes in New Zealand. The Rainbow Reading Programme (Pluck, 1995) is probably the most common example of one such programme. Many of the New Zealand *Journal Stories* have also been produced on tapes over the years (and now also CDs) and these can still be used to supplement other class reading programmes. Teachers can also sometimes produce their own tape recordings of stories as an additional resource for helping students with literacy learning difficulties in their class.

While the main purpose in using recorded stories in reading programmes is to enable the student to listen to another person reading the story, there are, nevertheless, other purposes attached to this reading approach. The development of

vocabulary knowledge and the opportunity to hear a competent reader model fluent reading are two further positive elements. Probably the main purpose for using audio-recorded stories in the classroom is to allow the student to build up a 'reading mileage' (or familiarity) of texts that might normally not be read independently. Advocates of TARPs often claim that because the story is being read to the student, this may also reduce 'anxiety' because the student has the flexibility to listen to the story as many times as they choose (Medcalf, Moore & Medcalf, 2003). However, while the general claims about the effectiveness of such programmes may be correct for many participants (especially for those students who are reading near to their chronological age), the situation is not as clear for those who have very severe reading problems. The use of audio-recorded stories for these particular students may be of limited benefit. Some of these issues will be discussed briefly.

## READING VERSUS LISTENING: THE "RAT AND THE TROLLEY IN THE MAZE" SCENARIO

It is often difficult to ascertain if the student is actually following the text and keeping pace with the recorded voice unless the teacher (or another adult), is sitting beside the student during the playing of the recordings to monitor reading behaviour. For such programmes to be maximally effective, it is important that the student is able to keep pace with the recorded voice and to also match what is heard with what is printed on the page. It has been suggested that listening to recorded stories may be likened to someone wheeling a rat through a maze in order to 'teach' the rat how to escape. This analogy relates to the amount of active participation required by each of the participants in the activity. It has been stated, for example, that when listening to recorded stories:

Children do not confront the decoding problem. Someone else does the work for them. Calfee and Drum use an interesting analogy. A rat learns little about a maze if it is simply wheeled through the corridor in a trolley, and we suspect the same idea holds for reading (cited in Nicholson, 1986, no page ref).

In the rat scenario, one could imagine that the trolley wheeler is clearly doing most of the hard work while the rat is probably expending minimal effort. Likewise, during the process of listening to recorded stories, the difficult task (reading the story) has already been completed, leaving the listener free to choose how much (or little) they are prepared to get involved.

Yet, in claiming support for the effectiveness of TARPs Medcalf (1989) claims that these programmes “provide the reader with access to the inherent meaning of the text and the student is thus able to use his or her knowledge of spoken language to help with word solving” (p. 15). While a recorded story may provide access to the *meaning* in the text, it is highly unlikely that the listener is actually involved in any *word solving* strategies at the same time. Because there is no *necessity* for the listener to decode (or indeed, even look at) unfamiliar words during the listening process, there is also no incentive (or opportunity) to develop any specific decoding strategies. It may be that the words are learnt ‘by osmosis’ through repeated exposures to the recordings, but even this is unlikely for students who are having severe reading difficulties. The key to a more effective use of recorded stories for students with severe reading difficulties is to provide opportunities for the student to also develop metacognitive word identification strategies.

There are basically two separate purposes for which audio-assisted readings may be used within a school setting. One is where students may be given an opportunity to just listen to a recorded story as part of an integrated reading/language programme such as that which occurs on a regular basis within many junior classes. The second purpose for which audio-assisted reading may be used is in pull-out programmes such as those often taken by ancillary or special needs staff for students who have literacy-related learning needs. It is this second group that often also has severe decoding difficulties. However, because these students are likely to be very poor decoders, it is even more important that such programmes allow opportunities for them to be exposed to activities that encourage word identification strategies. The following discussion outlines some teaching activities that may be incorporated into any tape-assisted (or recorded) reading programme.

### **The development of metacognitive decoding and spelling strategies within an audio-assisted reading programme**

Metacognitive learning involves helping the learner to develop strategies that enable them to see a purpose for their learning and to give them the

opportunities to put the particular strategies into practice in meaningful contexts. There is evidence to indicate that poor or inefficient decoding skills are the primary cause of most reading difficulties and that teachers tend to place limited emphasis on the explicit teaching of such skills (Greaney, 2001; Tunmer & Greaney, 2008; Ryder, Tunmer & Greaney, 2008; Tunmer, Prochnow, Greaney & Chapman, 2007). It therefore makes sense that programmes designed for children with reading difficulties should include elements that attend to their decoding deficits. The following adaptation to the regular tape-assisted reading programme encourages the development of strategic decoding skills while at the same time, retaining the opportunity for the student to listen to the recorded story as often as necessary.

For the example included in this article, a *School Journal* story (Matthew, 1999) has been used. It is suggested that teachers make up their own activities using the following stages. This may include reading stories on to tapes. The tasks may be used with individual students or with small groups. There are three main stages in planning and teaching the metacognitive decoding and spelling activities.

### **STAGE 1**

#### **Pre-listening/reading word list check**

The teacher selects a group of words (10-12) from the story that are most likely to cause problems for the student. These words may be selected on the basis of a recent (pre-reading) running record of errors, or they may be selected based on ‘teacher hunches’ of the likely difficulty that such words may present to the student if read independently. These words are written in a list down the left side of a prepared worksheet (Appendix A). The student attempts to read each word in the list prior to listening to the recorded story. Those words that are incorrectly-read are written in the central column by the teacher for a ‘word analysis’ task.

#### **Word analysis activity**

English written words may be segmented in various ways including syllables, individual letters, onset and rime, individual phonemes and frequently-occurring orthographic boundaries. It is often difficult for students who have poor decoding skills to distinguish the *orthographic boundaries* in many unfamiliar words that they encounter during regular reading. One way to assist students to locate these relevant orthographic boundaries (as a precursor to decoding), is to highlight these boundaries through explicit instruction. Fluency in reading results from efficient decoding

practices. Furthermore, fluent readers are able to efficiently recognise and identify these relevant orthographic boundaries in unfamiliar words, and it is this efficiency that enables them to read (and comprehend) texts more effectively. The importance of teaching explicit decoding skills to students with reading difficulties has been well-documented in the research literature (Adams, 1991; Greaney, 2001, 2002; Ryder et al, 2008; Tunmer et al., 2007; Tunmer & Greaney, 2008).

### The relevant orthographic boundaries

Although all English written words are comprised of individual letters, these letters can frequently be further grouped into larger spelling letter-sound patterns (boundaries) for decoding purposes. These spelling patterns enable the fluent reader to efficiently decode words without the need to consciously 'sound out' every letter. This knowledge of spelling patterns also allows the reader to read many similar words by using orthographic analogies to other familiar words with the same patterns (Greaney, Tunmer & Chapman, 1997; Tunmer, Greaney & Chapman, 1999; Tunmer & Greaney, 2008). The most common groups of spelling patterns include the consonant blends (e.g. st, cl, str, etc), consonant digraphs (e.g. sh, wr, ch, etc), vowel digraphs (e.g. ee, ea, ai, ou, etc) and the vowel phonograms (e.g. ell, ight, um, etc).

It is important that developing readers are able to identify these spelling patterns within words and it therefore makes sense to teach these patterns if/when they occur within unfamiliar words. The word analysis activity alerts the student to these particular patterns. It is also important that the student is encouraged to first look for these particular spelling patterns in the unfamiliar words (that they encounter during regular reading) and to then blend these patterns together to identify the word. However, this is unlikely to occur if the student is not familiar with (or aware of) these patterns.

### Teaching the relevant spelling patterns

The teacher (initially) identifies for the student the relevant spelling patterns within the unfamiliar words by circling the patterns with a pencil (Appendix A). The student is then encouraged to first identify (read) the patterns and then to *blend them together* to make the word. The word *lucky* for example, would be segmented at the *uck* pattern and the student would be required to say this segment and then to blend it with the initial (l) and the final (y) sound to make the word (*lucky*). The teacher may need to model this process in the beginning. As the student becomes familiar

with the word analysis activity, he/she should be encouraged to 'circle the spelling patterns' themselves. This identification and blending activity is completed for each of the words on the list that the student was unable to read in the pre-reading task.

## STAGE 2

### Listening to the story

This stage involves the regular story listening session where the student reads along with the recording. It would be expected that the pre-reading word analysis task should enable the student to more easily identify or recognise these words as/when they are encountered in the story, based on their familiarity that was gained from the previous task.

## STAGE 3

### Post-listening/reading independent word analysis activities

Following the listening exercise the student may then copy out the words from one of the word analysis cards (Appendix B) into their exercise books. These words are also taken from the story. When each word is printed, the student is then required to *circle the relevant spelling patterns* (e.g., consonant blends/digraphs, vowel digraphs, vowel phonograms).

At a later convenient time the student's word reading can also be retested using the original words used in the pre-reading exercise (Appendix A, column 3). This is a form of post-test revision and it allows the teacher to monitor the specific decoding skills (and to re-teach if necessary). A running record (using the text from the recording) could also complement this assessment. Samples of four *follow-up independent word analysis cards* are included to illustrate these activities (Appendix B).

## CONCLUSIONS

Some teachers who have used tape-assisted (or some other forms of audio-recorded) reading programmes may not necessarily agree with these formalised 'word study or decoding' elements because it is frequently claimed that the main purpose of using recorded readings is to increase the student's 'reading mileage' and/or to expose the student to texts that he/she might not normally be able to read independently (rather than to explicitly teach specific skills). While these claims are partly valid, it may be that (only) listening to recorded readings is a less-effective way of helping those particular students who have very limited

decoding strategies. Listening to someone else decoding for them doesn't address this problem at all. If it did, then all that would be necessary would be to have large numbers of recorded stories available to these students. However, it is not that simple. It is important, therefore, that teachers are aware of both the strengths and limitations of audio-recorded programmes that do not include any elements of explicit teaching (and particularly, word-level identification strategies). While audio-recorded reading programmes have their place, they also have limitations particularly for those students who have poor decoding skills. Furthermore, it tends to be these very students who are also frequently given such interventions as the 'default programme of choice'. The activities suggested the stages above add an explicit decoding and spelling element to such programmes, while at the same time, retaining the more popular listening aspect that they provide. The activities also allows for some form of measuring of progress and achievement. It provides an opportunity for students to further develop their own word knowledge and strategic decoding skills that may be utilised during regular independent reading and spelling at a later stage.

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## AUTHOR'S PROFILE

**Dr Keith Greaney**



**Dr Keith Greaney** is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Educational Studies at Massey University College of Education where he teaches both undergraduate and postgraduate papers in literacy. He also researches in the area of literacy learning difficulties. Before coming to Massey he taught for 28 years in primary schools including as an RTR (now RT:Lit) for 12 years.

EMAIL  
k.t.greaney@massey.ac.nz

**APPENDIX A**

Tape assisted reading programme for: \_\_\_\_\_

Title of book: **The Lucky House (2.4.99)**

Dates/times I listened to the tape:	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9
<b>Words (pre-reading)</b>	<b>Word Analysis</b>					<b>Words (after reading)</b>			
lucky	l (uck) y					beetle			
jacket	j (ack) (et)					touched			
beetle	b (ee) t (le)					lucky			
plenty	(pl) (en) (ty)					plenty			
bullet	b (ull) (et)					shrieked			
shrieked	(sh) r (ie) k (ed)					squashed			
brightly	(br) (ight) (ly)					curtain			
squashed	(squ) (ash) (ed)					twig			
touched	t (ou) (ch) (ed)					brightly			
curtain	c (ur) t (ain)					bullet			
twig	(tw) (ig)								

**APPENDIX B**

Post-listening independent word analysis activity cards

<p><b>Card 1</b></p> <p>talking</p> <p>window</p> <p>sheets</p> <p>insects</p> <p>extra</p> <p>unpeg</p> <p>living</p> <p>crawling</p> <p>line</p>	<p><b>Card 2</b></p> <p>black</p> <p>frame</p> <p>knew</p> <p>crab</p> <p>poster</p> <p>chosen</p> <p>claws</p> <p>desk</p> <p>company</p>	<p><b>Card 3</b></p> <p>front</p> <p>written</p> <p>notice</p> <p>sofa</p> <p>coloured</p> <p>squash</p> <p>bite</p> <p>stapled</p> <p>shallow</p>	<p><b>Card 4</b></p> <p>grow</p> <p>spider</p> <p>summer</p> <p>tall</p> <p>bedroom</p> <p>pretending</p> <p>strong</p> <p>cuddling</p> <p>nippers</p>
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