



Greater Boston Jewish Coalition for Literacy

Cambridge Remote Tutoring Reflections

Slow Down. Sound out. Look in the Glossary.

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Getting Organized Remotely

When the Cambridge Public Schools closed because of COVID 19, I emailed Pattyann Zotz, the 1st - 3rd grade teacher with whom I'd been working for over three years. I asked Pattyann if she could think of a way I could still help her students, even if everything were online.

Pattyann responded quickly and asked if I were willing to tutor R, a first grader whom I knew, but had not tutored before. R loved to write poetry and had shared some of her poems with me earlier in the year. Of course, I said "yes."

Alison Boreiko, Pattyann's Assistant Teacher, emailed me shortly to explain what they needed me to do. They were using an online reading program called Raz-Kids. I had no idea how to teach reading online and I had never used anything like Raz-Kids. Ali gave me a tutorial in which she showed me how Raz-Kids worked, the reading R had already finished on Raz-Kids, and the problems Ali and Pattyann had discovered with R's work. Ali also did her own assessment of R's issues and wrote up notes to help me plan my lessons. She suggested I try to read two books with R during each half hour lesson. Also, Ali emailed R's parents to set up a time for me to tutor R with Raz-Kids. We found a time that was mutually available, and I was set for my tutoring sessions on Google Meet.

After reading the notes Ali provided, I knew R had trouble with compound words, words that were plural, and words that ended in "ed." Although she had read many books in Raz-Kids, she was not doing well on her quizzes. Something was not working with her comprehension, as well as her decoding. Ali and I decided R would not take any quizzes during my time with her. Rather, my goal was to get her to read better and enjoy it.

Ali had told me the level at which R was reading, so I chose two books from the large selection on Raz-Kids that I thought she would like. The online program has a way to project the books on screen, so R and I could see the words and pictures together.

Diving Into Literacy Learning

As R read the first book, I could see the difficulties to which Ali had alerted me. I also noted that when R didn't know a word, she used a word that had some of the same letters as the one she didn't know. These didn't make sense, but R had no way of knowing that. She did not stop to sound out any words.

When I suggested the second book I had chosen, R said she would rather not read that book, but chose another. I decided to go with her choice to see what she would do. I noticed that R had the same issues as with the first book, except that she had no trouble with compound words. It also became apparent that she liked to read very quickly when she knew the words. I wrote up what I discovered for Ali and Pattyann in Google Docs. The latter became something I did every week.

For the next week, I worked with R on plurals and words with "ed." I purposely chose a story that had these endings. And, when R started to read too quickly, I slowed her down and asked her to look carefully at the word. She quickly caught on to the endings she was missing. I also let her choose the second book to read, something that continued throughout our sessions together.

After a few weeks, R asked if she could try a book from the next higher level. I told her I would ask Ali, who promptly said "yes" when I sent her an email with the question. R was very excited to try the higher level. I reminded her to slow down, and to sound out the words she did not know rather than make up a word. I had to help her with difficult sight words, but in general she did well with sounding out words. I discovered she often did not know the meanings of the words she sounded out, so I gave her the meaning or we looked at the glossary often provided at the end of a story. R liked the glossary so much that she requested we look at the glossary, if there was one, before we began any new story.

R and I continued in this way, moving up one more level before the end of the school year. At that time, R asked if I were going to tutor her through the summer. I agreed to do so through the month of July. Even with one week of technical difficulties (We botched an invitation on Google Meet), I continued to pick one story, R another. I constantly reminded her to slow down and sound out the words she didn't know.

At our final session R asked if she could go up another level. She chose *The Three Little Pigs* thinking it would be easy. She started to race over the familiar "Little Pig, Little Pig let me in..." and shortly hit a word she didn't know. As she manufactured a word, I stopped her. She automatically slowed down and sounded it out. At the end of our time when I asked her what she remembered most from our sessions together, she smiled and said, "Slow down. Sound out words I don't know. And if I don't know the meaning, look in the glossary or ask someone." I asked her if she had a dictionary. She leaned over and showed me the family dictionary. I don't know if R is ready to use it, but she knows if someone can't tell her the meaning of a word, there is some place she can try to look it up herself.