Picking Up the Pace: Effective Approaches to Accelerate Fluency and Comprehension in Students with Disabilities

Greg Benner, Keith Smolkowski, Stephanie Al Otaiba, Jill Allor, and June Preast

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SALT LAKE CITY
MARCH 11-14, 2026

Agenda

- The Why
- The Study
- The Intervention
- The Case Stories
- Questions

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Project Intensity Team

Friends on the Block Research and Development

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The Why

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The Pervasive Narrative of the 95%

- Where does this narrative come from?
  - Mathes et al., 2005; Moats, 2020; Torgesen, 2004; Al Otaiba & Fuchs, 2006
- Is it true?
- Who can learn to read?
- We are working to rewrite the narrative of 95%!
  - Allor et al., 2014; Browder, Ahlgrim-Delzell, Courtade, Gibbs, & Flowers, 2008; Connor, Alberto, Compton, & O'Connor, 2014; Lemons et al., 2015

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Reading:
WHAT you need to learn doesn’t change

- "Cultural, economic, and educational circumstances obviously affect children's progress," …"But what they need to learn does not change."
  - (Dr. Mark Seidenberg in his book Language at the Speed of Sight: How We Read, Why So Many Can't, and What Can Be Done About It)
- Differences in necessity for intensive repetition and scaffolding certainly exist when working with students who have complex needs

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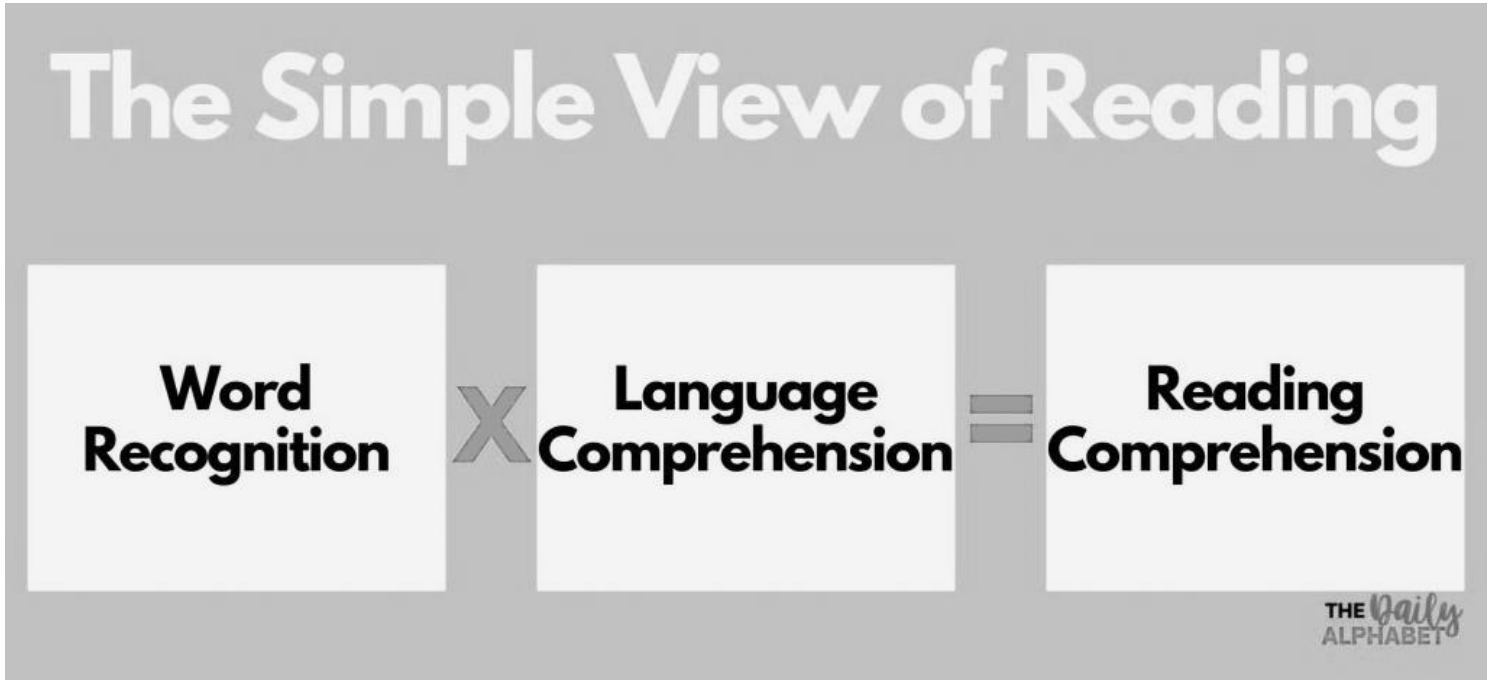
The Simple View of Reading

- Word Recognition (code focused)
- Language Comprehension (meaning focused)
- Reading Comprehension (the goal of reading)



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The Study

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Primary Research Question

Do students with disabilities who experience intensive literacy needs, including students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, who participate in FOTB demonstrate greater reading and language outcomes compared to students who participate in BAU reading instruction?

Participants and Dosage

Total Participants: 132 (67 treatment; 65 control)

- Mean Age: 7.69 years
- Mean IQ (KBIT): 70.84 (range: 40-106)

Disability Percentages (Combined):

- IDD/DD: 42.4%
- Autism: 7.6%
- Specific Learning Disability: 14.4%
- Speech/Language or Other: 20.5%
- Not Available: 15.2%

Intervention Dosage (Averaged):

- Hours of instruction: ~51 hours
- Weeks of instruction: ~34 weeks
- Days per week: ~3.6
- Minutes per session: ~25

Program Completion:

- Cohort 1: 51.6% completed program in ≤42 weeks
- Cohort 2: 36.1% completed program in ≤42 weeks

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Results Summary

Measures Reported Today (C1 & C2)	*p*	*g*
FOTB (proximal measure of target words)	**<.0001**	**0.98**
CTOPP Blending	0.25	0.20
WIAT Pseudoword Decoding	0.098	0.30
WIAT Word Reading	**0.008**	**0.37**
WIAT Oral Reading Fluency	**<.0001**	**0.82**
WIAT Receptive Vocabulary	0.4474	0.16
WIAT Oral Discourse	0.3930	-0.13
WIAT Expressive Vocabulary	0.3495	-0.14
WIAT Oral Word Fluency	0.9244	-0.01
WIAT Reading Comprehension	**0.006**	**0.59**

Note. *p* values adjusted with Benjamini–Hochberg correction for 22 total tests

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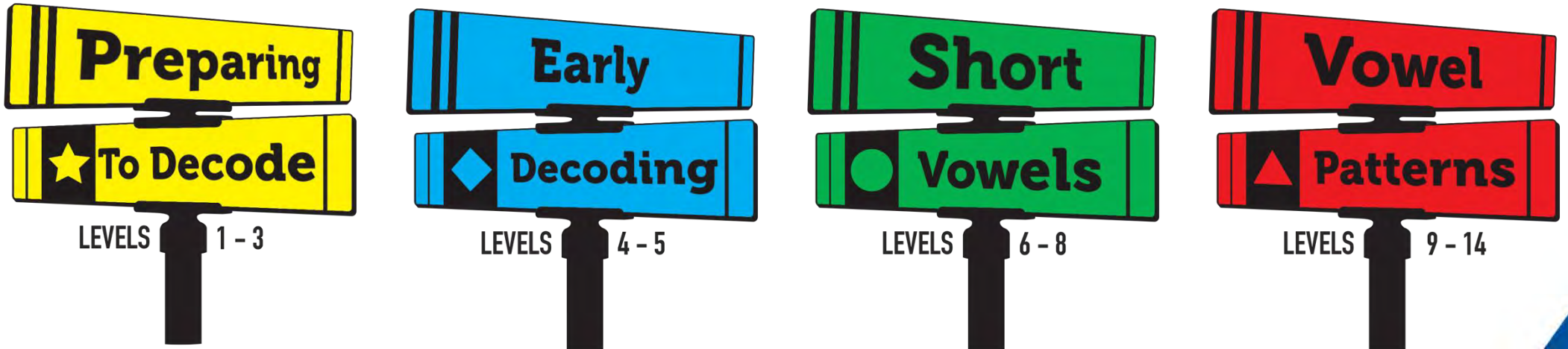
The Intervention

What is Friends on the Block?

A comprehensive and intensive **early literacy program** (initial instruction or intervention) designed to be **customizable** and provide needed supports and practice so **all students** can attain early literacy skills, particularly those with **intensive needs** such as students with disabilities (e.g., dyslexia, learning disabilities, intellectual and developmental disabilities).

What are the components of FOTB?

- 60 student books with carefully controlled, decodable text
- Each book has a detailed Teacher’s Guide and materials
- Over 100 learning games that provide specific cumulative practice of skills
- Organized into 14 levels that span four stages of skill development



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Innovative Scope and Sequence

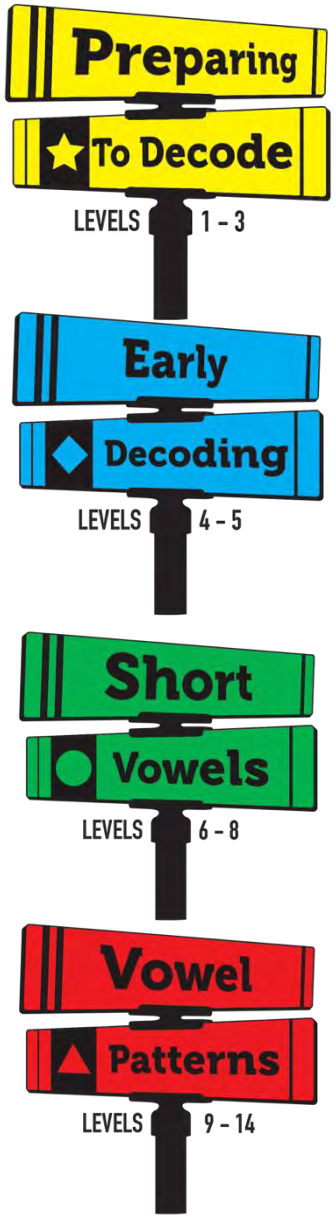
- Focuses on key skills within all strands of word recognition and language

- Facilitates integration of skills across strands and apply as they read books

Scope and Sequence

Strand	Objective/Skill	Activity *Learning Game*	1-3	4-5	6-8	9-14
Language: Comprehension & Vocabulary	Make oral predictions about a text	Predict				
	Develop language and comprehension	Discuss				
	Discuss and summarize a text using a graphic organizer	Review/ Get the Gist (Level 12+)				
	Develop oral language by sorting words based on meaning	*Think and Sort*				
Phonemic Awareness	Orally blend the first sound and rime into a spoken word	Say the Word				
		Sounds Bingo				
	Say the first sound of spoken words	Say the First Sound				
		Sounds Bingo				
	Orally blend sounds (phonemes) into a word	Say the Word				
		Sounds Bingo				
	Say the sounds (phonemes) in spoken words	Say the Sounds				
		Sounds Bingo				
Word Recognition	Fluently pronounce taught irregular (or temporarily irregular) words	*Read It*				
		Amazing Words				
		Word Bingo				
		Word Play				
	Fluently say the most common sound for taught letters	Say the Letter-Sound				
		Climb and Slide				
	Sound out and read short vowel words with taught letters/patterns	Sound It Out				
		I Got It				
	Sound out and fluently read words with taught letters/patterns	Sound It Out				
		Speed Reader				
		I Got It				
	Fluently read target words, including taught irregular words and words with taught letters/patterns	*Read through the Seasons*				
		Word Bingo				
		Word Play				
	Pronounce words with taught patterns with *s*, *ed*, and *ing*	Read the Groups				
	Pronounce words with taught spelling patterns and syllable types	Read the Parts				
Fluency	Read target words and sentences fluently	*Super Sentences*				
	Read text with increasing fluency	Read				
Writing	Say the sounds in spoken words; spell words with taught letters/patterns	*I Got It*				
		Say and Write				
	Write sentences fluently	*Writing Super Sentences*				
Apply	Apply various skills in the context of a book	*Scavenger Hunt*				

FOTB Target Word List and Phonics Patterns



Friends on the Block Target Word List and Phonics Patterns

	Preparing to Decode			Early Decoding		Short Vowels			Vowel Patterns					
	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8	Level 9	Level 10	Level 11	Level 12	Level 13	Level 14
Letter Sounds	c, f, p, m, s, t	d, j, n	b, g, h, l, r	ck, k, a, z	u	ch, th, w, x, y	i, o, sh, qu, v	e	a-e, i-e, o-e	ai, ay, ol	al, ea, ee	ar, igh, er	oa, or, ow	ir, oo, ur
Sound It Out Words (Decodable)	In Levels 1-3 students are learning phonemic awareness blending and segmenting, letter-sounds, and a small number of irregular words. Students begin in the level in which they miss two or more target words (Levels 1-5) or four or more target words (Levels 6-14). As soon as the students learn most of the words in the starting level, move to the next level. (Note: Sound it Out words in Levels 4-5 are repeated in Level 6.)			am and at can dad mad sad	am and at can dad mad sad	am and at can dad fun had hat mad ran run sad sun up us	big did got him if in it mom not on sit stop this will with	bed best end get help let next red step tell them then went when yes	came fine five gave home hope like made make nine same side smile time white	cold day hold may old plain play rain roll say stay tail told wait way	all call clean each eat feel green neat need read see seem small tall wall	after better chapter different hard high light might never night number part right start together	before below door follow forget goal know more morning own road short show slow yellow	bird book burn cook disturb girl good hook hurt shirt stood third took turn wood
Read It Words (Irregular)	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7	Level 8	Level 9	Level 10	Level 11	Level 12	Level 13	Level 14
	a do I like not want	dad here is look mom see the where	are at happy in no she yes you	good help play there to was	big have little my please very what	be friend give go he her it me on so thank we who with your	because care come could feel first of how next said should take too why would	again away came clothes cold eat food for from need oh out put ready some	about animal been day does down every many one or other push snow they were	any ball both boy done family girl more most once room saw their warm young	another answer kind know our people question really right second soon sure thought word work	almost book bought break buy easy four learn money new probably review these two watch	above alone by eight find house idea often special talk through usually walk water worry	able along carry color full great heard instead live love move only over try world

Note: Words in blue are made up of patterns taught in later levels so they are temporarily irregular. They are introduced prior to the pattern to facilitate meaning and may facilitate learning of the phonics pattern.

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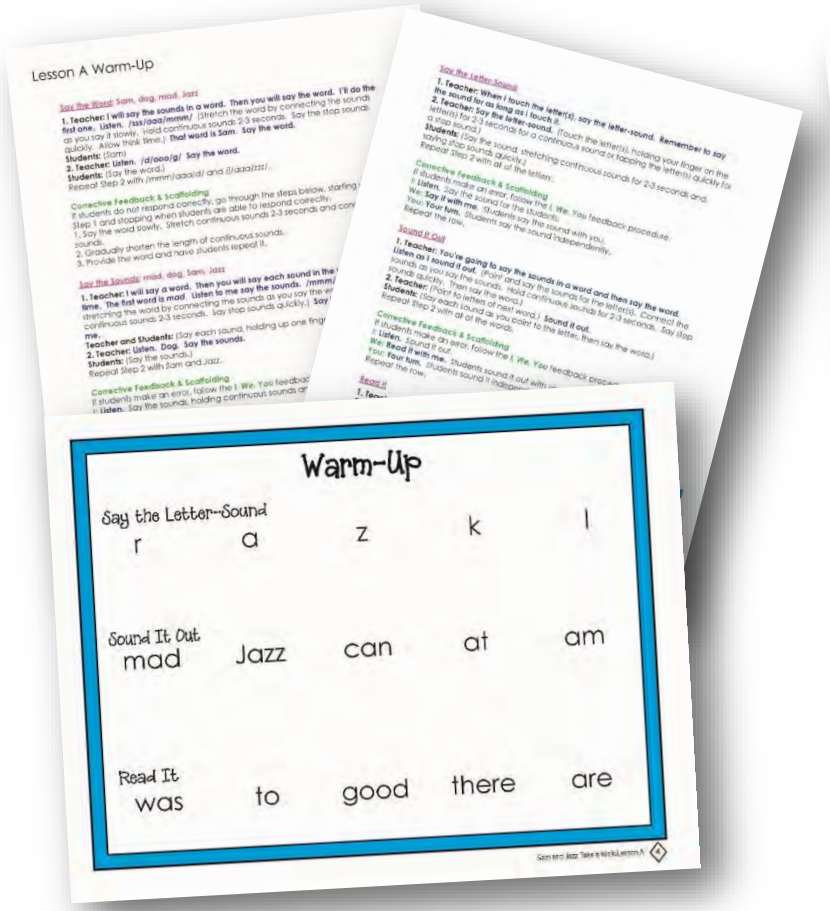
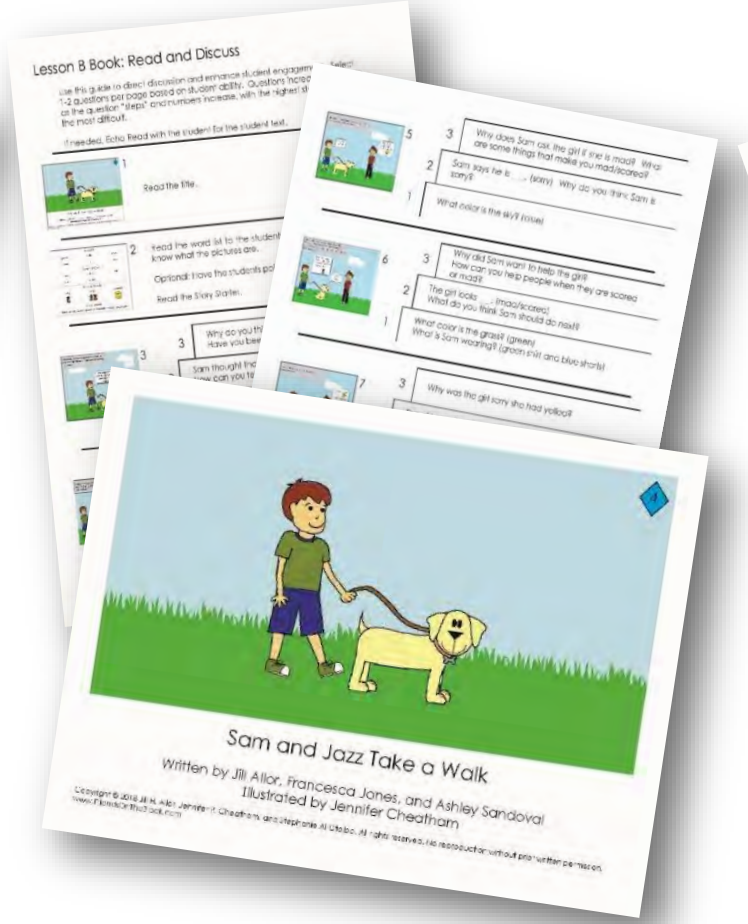
A Typical FOTB Lesson
(Flexible: About 20-35 minutes, Level 4 Example)

Part 1: Warm-Ups
5-8 minutes

Part 2: Book Reading
10-15 minutes

Part 3: Learning Games
5-10 minutes





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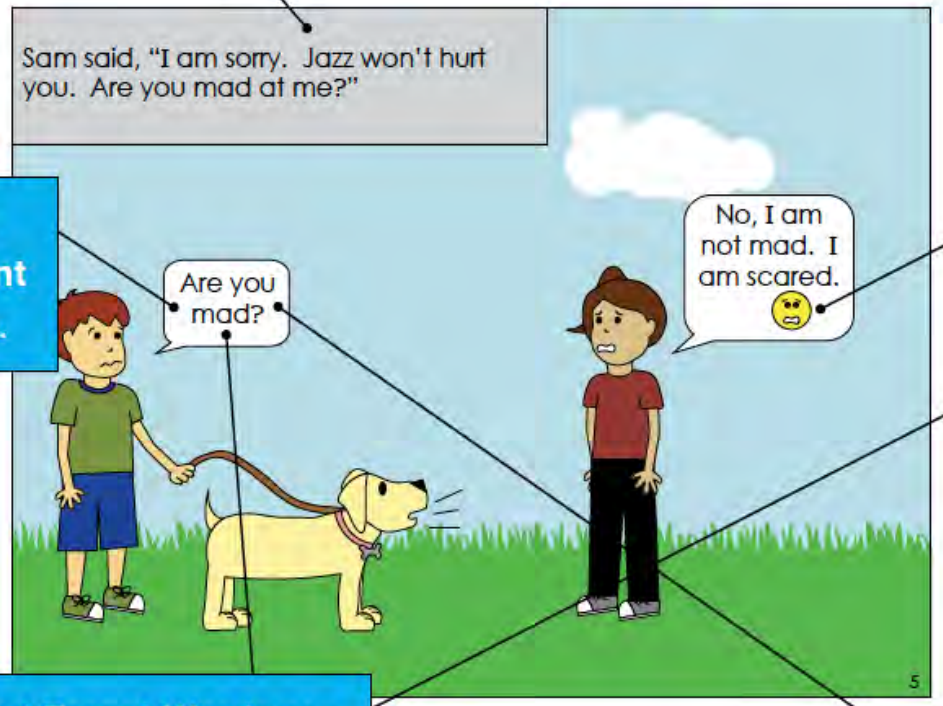
LEVEL 4 BOOK SAMPLE PAGES

A friend (teacher, tutor, family member, peer) reads **Helper Text** in gray boxes. Helper Text improves the story and supports comprehension and vocabulary.

A few **Picture Words** improve the story and support meaning, as well as basic vocabulary.

The student reads **Student Text** in white.



Sound It Out Target Words are decodable words that are also high-frequency words.

Read It Target Words are irregular or temporarily irregular high-frequency words.

The Intervention: Supporting Fluency

FOTB Fluency Building Routine

- Students are not expected to be fluent before they move to a new level; important to move to next level so students will learn new words and letter patterns
- Use the Fluency Building Routine to focus on fluency
- Consider additional practice with previous level books and games
- Add fluency passages to lessons when students reach Level 5.
  - Begin with Level 4 passages.

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Fluency Building Routine Directions

Fluency Building Routine

Materials:

• Choose the passage that is at least ONE level below your student's current level of instruction. For example, if the student is on Level 5 of Friends on the Block, choose the Level 4 passage. If needed, you may use the same passage in more than one lesson.

- student copy (page for student to read)
- examiner copy (page for tutor to mark on; page with numbers)

• timer

• red pencil or marker

• blue or black pencil or marker

• graph paper (or graph on computer or device)

General Directions:

Cold Read: Follow the procedures below, marking errors with a BLACK or BLUE pencil or marker and graphing the number of correct words per minute in REGULAR or BLUE colored pencil.

Hot Read: Follow the same procedures a second time, marking errors with a RED pencil and graphing the number of correct words per minute in RED.

Encourage the student by praising effort, prosody (reading with expression), and improvement from first to second reading and across days.

Fluency Building Routine

Detailed Procedures for Reading:

(place the student copy of the text in front of the student)

The title is _____. (read the title to the student, pointing to each word as you read it).

Please read this (point to the first word of the passage) ***out loud. If you get stuck, I will tell you the word so you can keep reading. Do your best reading. Start here*** (point to the first word of the passage). ***Begin.*** Start the timer when the student says the first word of the passage.

Mark errors by placing a slash mark on the missed word. At the end of **1 minute**, place a bracket ( ]) after the last word provided by the student, and say, "***Stop***."

If the student finishes the passage before 1 minute is over, write the number of seconds beneath the passage.

Graph the number of correct words with a REGULAR or BLUE pencil for the cold read and a RED pencil for the hot read.

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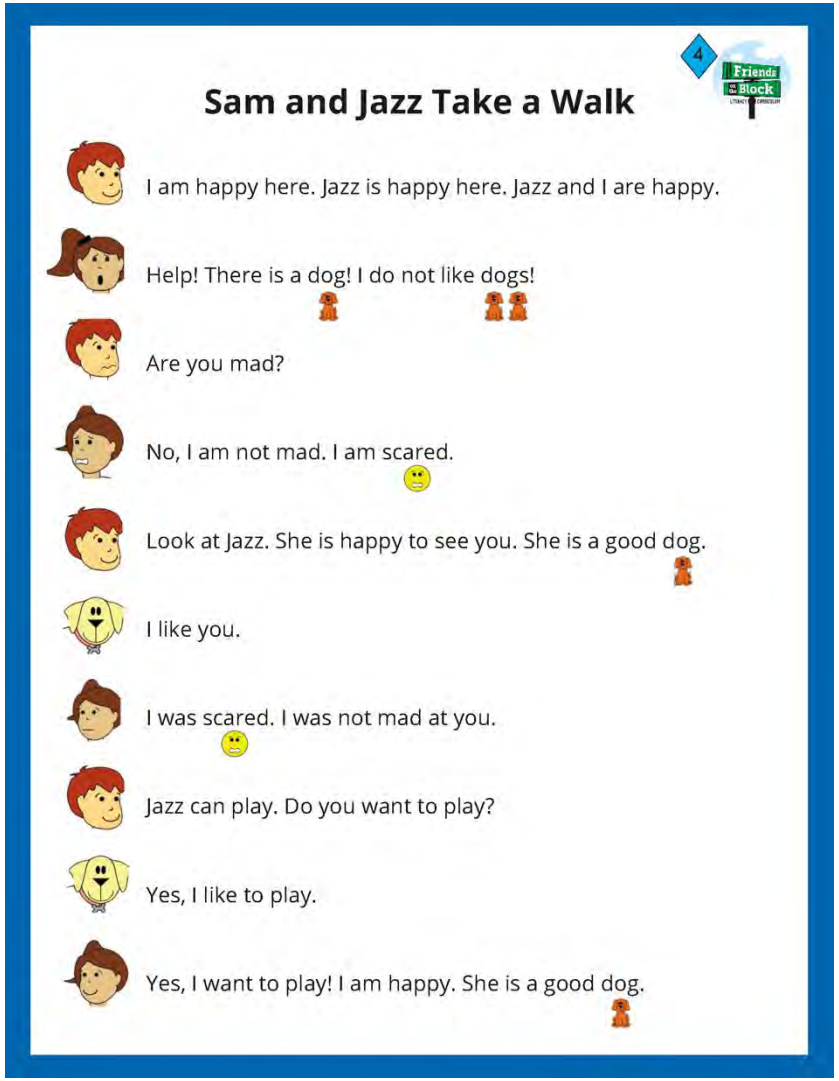
Sample Passage: Level 4



Sam and Jazz Take a Walk

I am happy here. Jazz is happy here. Jazz and I are happy.

Help! There is a dog! I do not like dogs!

Are you mad?

No, I am not mad. I am scared.

Look at Jazz. She is happy to see you. She is a good dog.

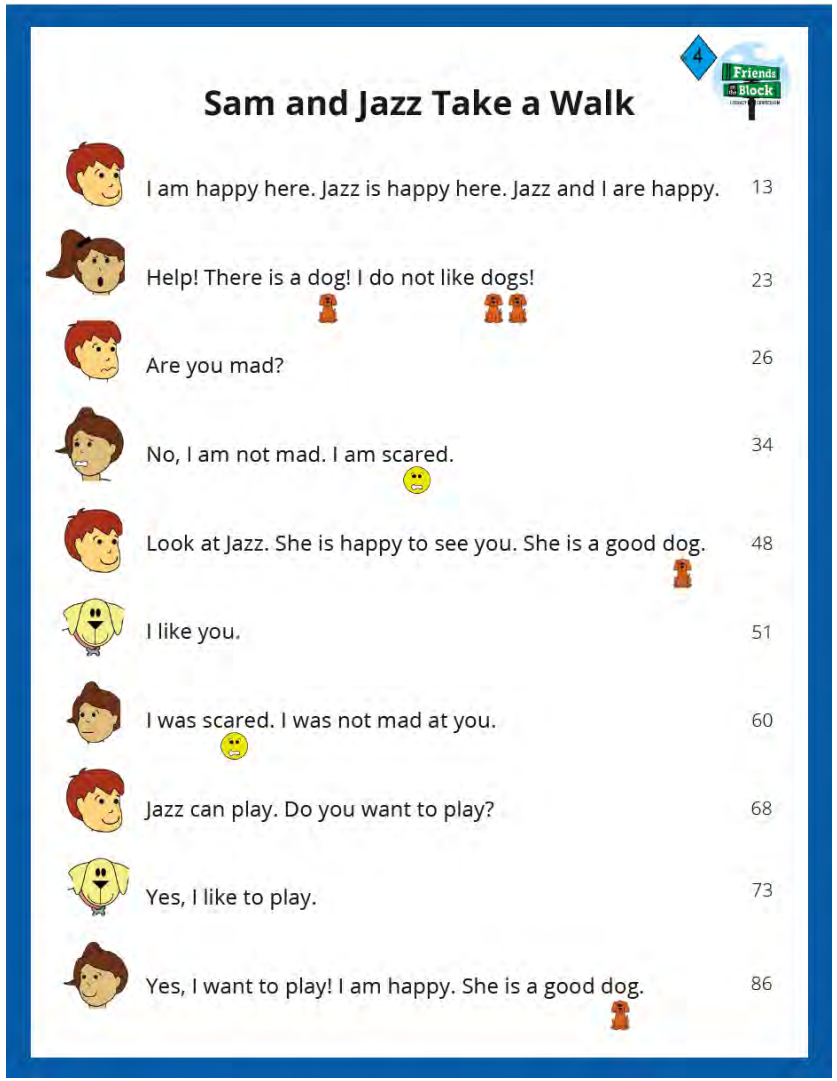
I like you.

I was scared. I was not mad at you.

Jazz can play. Do you want to play?

Yes, I like to play.

Yes, I want to play! I am happy. She is a good dog.



Sam and Jazz Take a Walk

I am happy here. Jazz is happy here. Jazz and I are happy.	13
Help! There is a dog! I do not like dogs!	23
Are you mad?	26
No, I am not mad. I am scared.	34
Look at Jazz. She is happy to see you. She is a good dog.	48
I like you.	51
I was scared. I was not mad at you.	60
Jazz can play. Do you want to play?	68
Yes, I like to play.	73
Yes, I want to play! I am happy. She is a good dog.	86

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Sample Passage: Level 10

Animals Up Close, Chapter 4

Frogs can hop. Some frogs can hop a long way. Some frogs are little. Once, I saw some frogs that were very, very little!

Snakes are very long. Their skin has scales. When they get big, they shed their old skin. They cannot bite food. They just gulp it down.

We had to go home at the end of the day. But I was not done looking at the animals. There are many animals. They can be plain, have scales, have a tail, like to be cold, like to roll a ball, or many more things. I want to see more animals up close!

Animals Up Close, Chapter 4

Frogs can hop. Some frogs can hop a long way. Some frogs 12
are little. Once, I saw some frogs that were very, very little! 24

Snakes are very long. Their skin has scales. When they get 35
big, they shed their old skin. They cannot bite food. They just 47
gulp it down. 50

We had to go home at the end of the day. But I was not done 66
looking at the animals. There are many animals. They can be 77
plain, have scales, have a tail, like to be cold, like to roll a ball, 92
or many more things. I want to see more animals up close! 104

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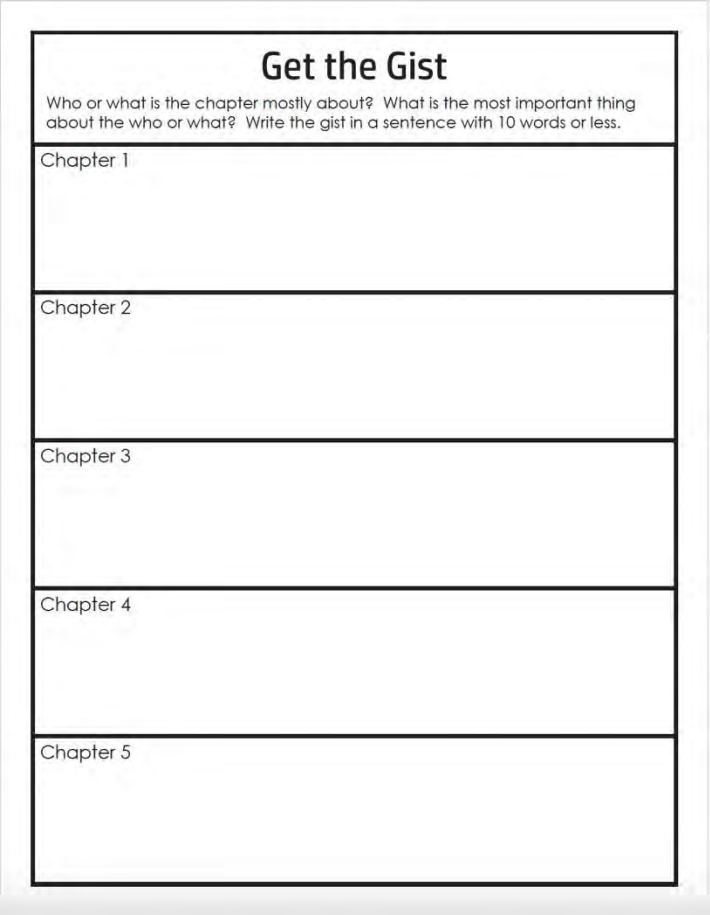
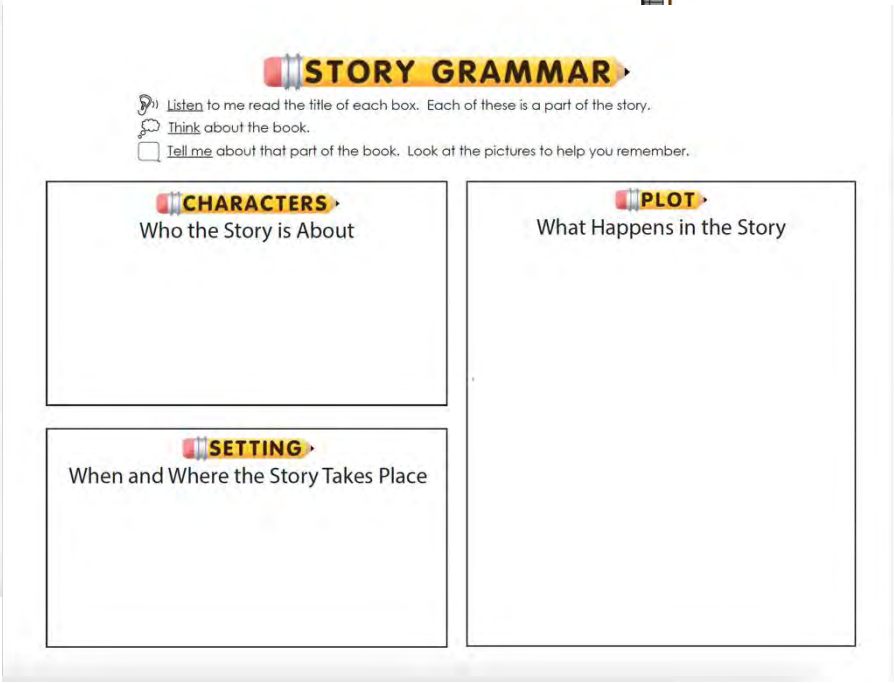
The Intervention: Supporting Comprehension

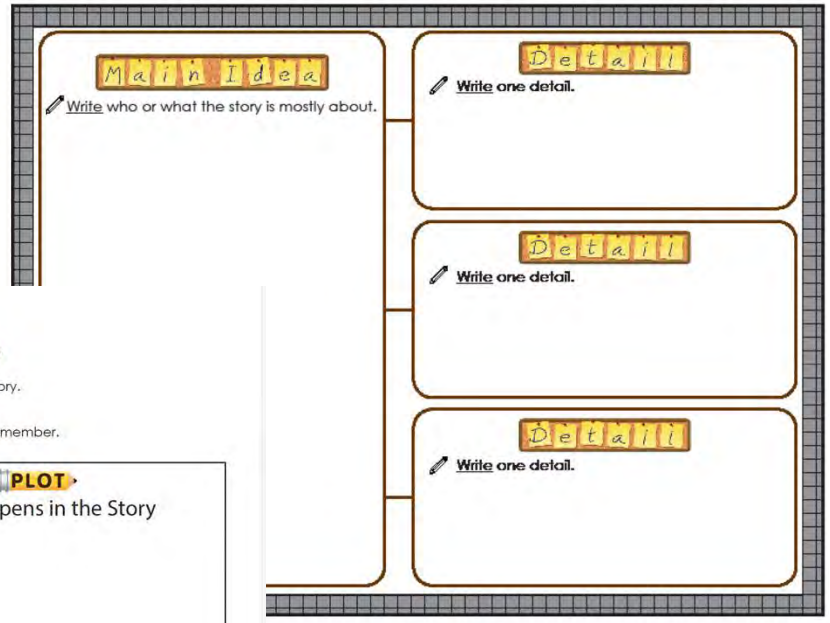
How to Support Comprehension in an FOTB Lesson

- Sometimes, students need a faster pace of instruction to prevent boredom/distractions
- Consider incorporating more challenging isolated decoding practice to grow student confidence
- Support comprehension at the student's decoding level with graphic organizers and think alouds
- Begin by selecting more obtainable comprehension questions and scale up as appropriate

Graphic Organizers Used in FOTB Lessons







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Scaling Up the Difficulty of Comprehension Questions

Level 3

What do you think is special about elephants?

What do you use to hold things? (hands/arms, bags, etc.)

Do you like hippos? What do you like about hippos?

Can you think of anything that reminds you of a hippo, or have you ever seen a hippo? (various; pigs, cartoon characters, etc.)

If you could have an elephant, a hippo, or a giraffe as a pet, which one would you want? Why?

Level 2

What is a word that describes elephants? (various; big, strong, opinion words)

Do boys or girls have tusks? (both)

Elephants swish their ___. (tails)

What is a word that describes hippos? (various)

Can hippos run fast? (yes)

Are giraffes tall or short? (tall) Are giraffes spotted or plain? (spotted)

Level 1

What is this? (an elephant)

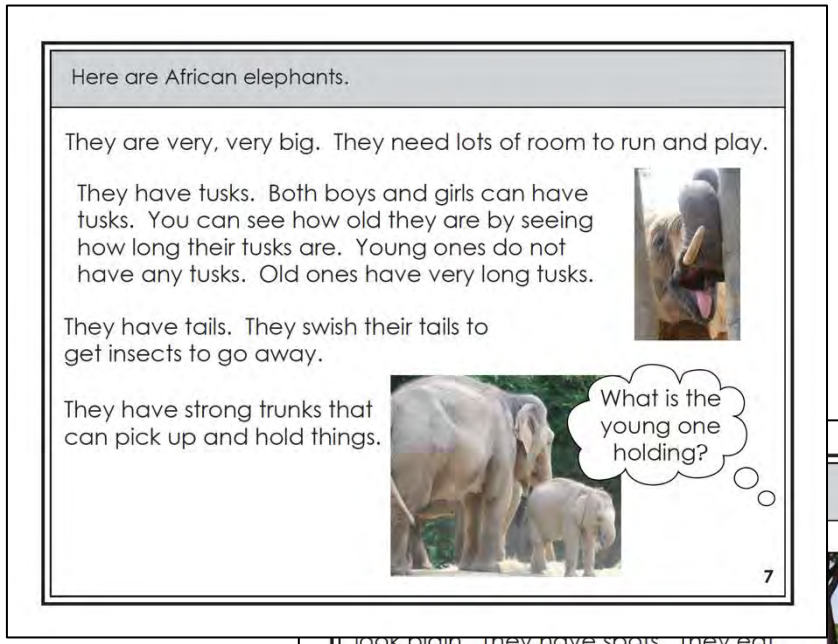
Point to the tusk.

Point to the baby elephant.

Are elephants big or small?

Page 8 :Point to the hippo.

Page 9: What is this? (giraffe)



Here are African elephants.

They are very, very big. They need lots of room to run and play.

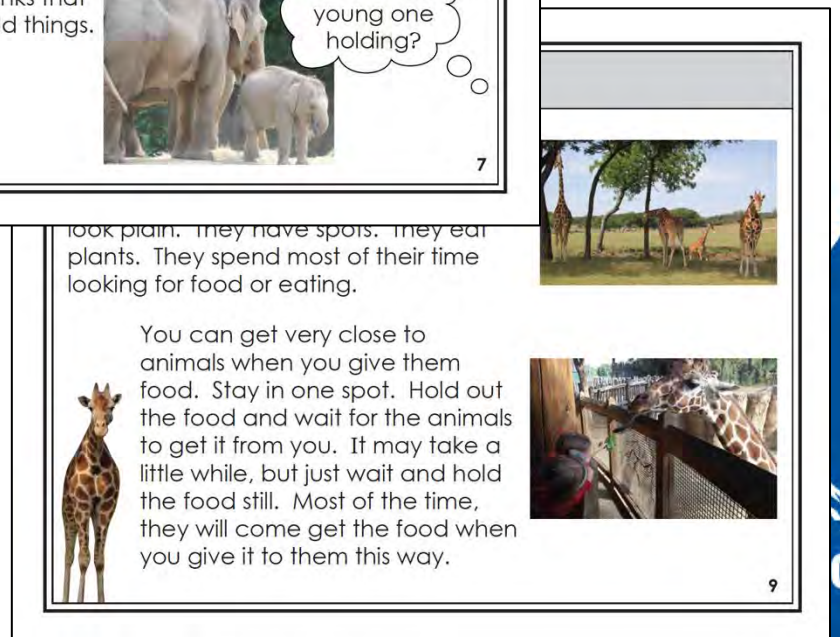
They have tusks. Both boys and girls can have tusks. You can see how old they are by seeing how long their tusks are. Young ones do not have any tusks. Old ones have very long tusks.

They have tails. They swish their tails to get insects to go away.

They have strong trunks that can pick up and hold things.

What is the young one holding?

7



plants. They spend most of their time looking for food or eating.

You can get very close to animals when you give them food. Stay in one spot. Hold out the food and wait for the animals to get it from you. It may take a little while, but just wait and hold the food still. Most of the time, they will come get the food when you give it to them this way.

9

The Case Stories

“Edwin” Age 5

The Importance of Early Intervention

Diagnosis: Developmental Disability

IQ (KBIT): 53

Began FOTB at level 1 and completed all 14 levels in 39 instructional weeks.

Received a total of 63.95 hours of one-on-one*, pull-out instruction with an average of 1.63 hours per week.

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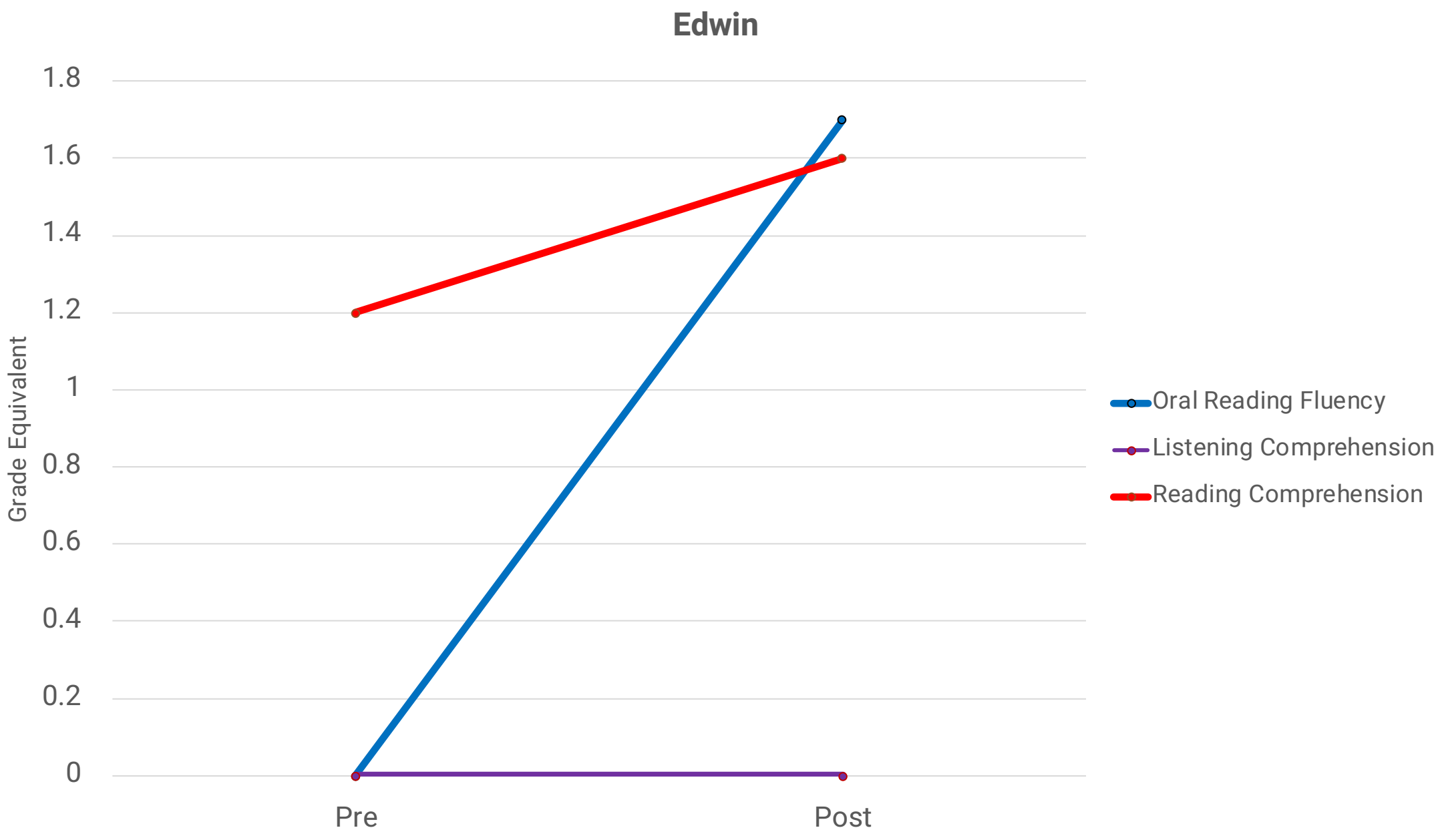
Edwin
1.8
1.6
1.4
1.2
1
0.8
0.6
0.4
0.2
0
Grade Equivalent
Pre
Post
Oral Reading Fluency
Listening Comprehension
Reading Comprehension

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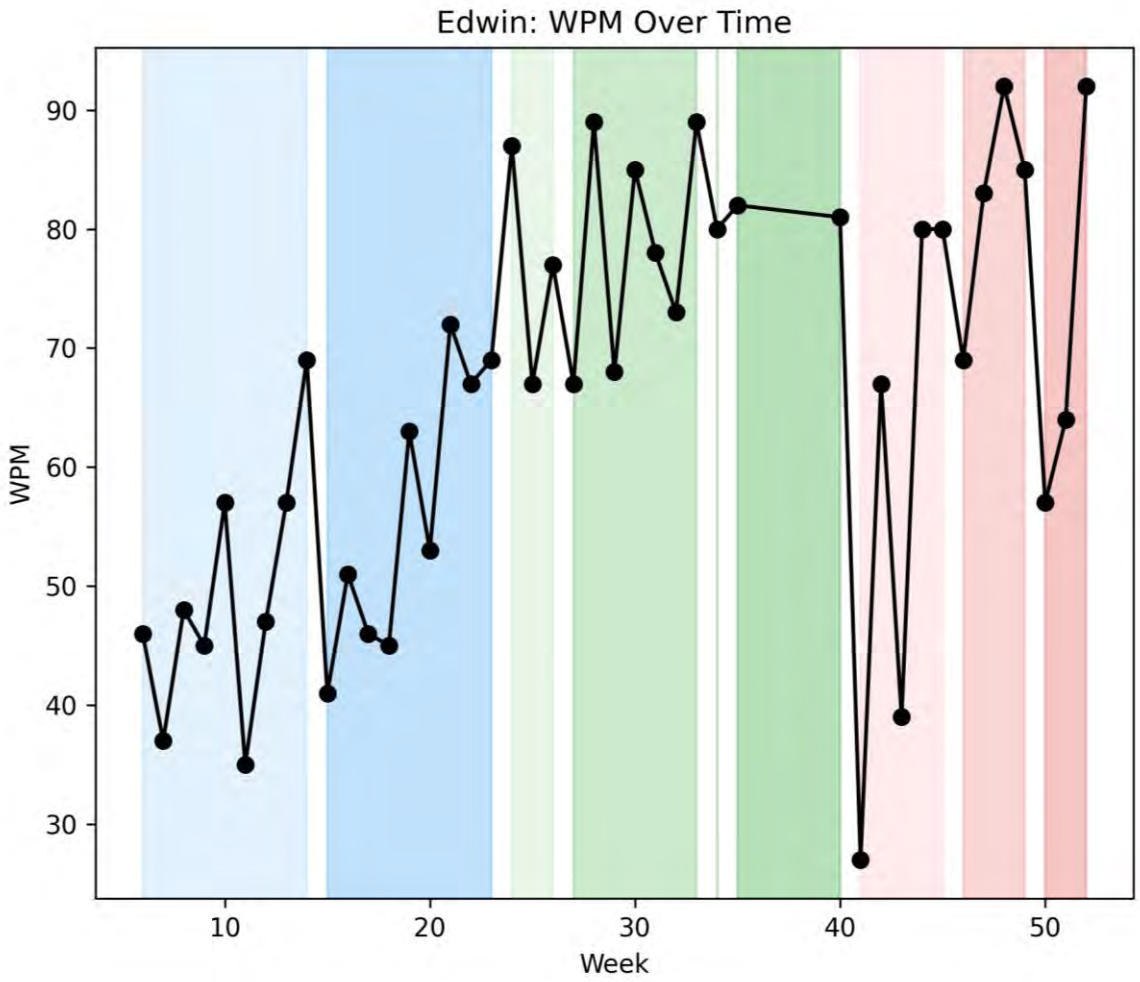
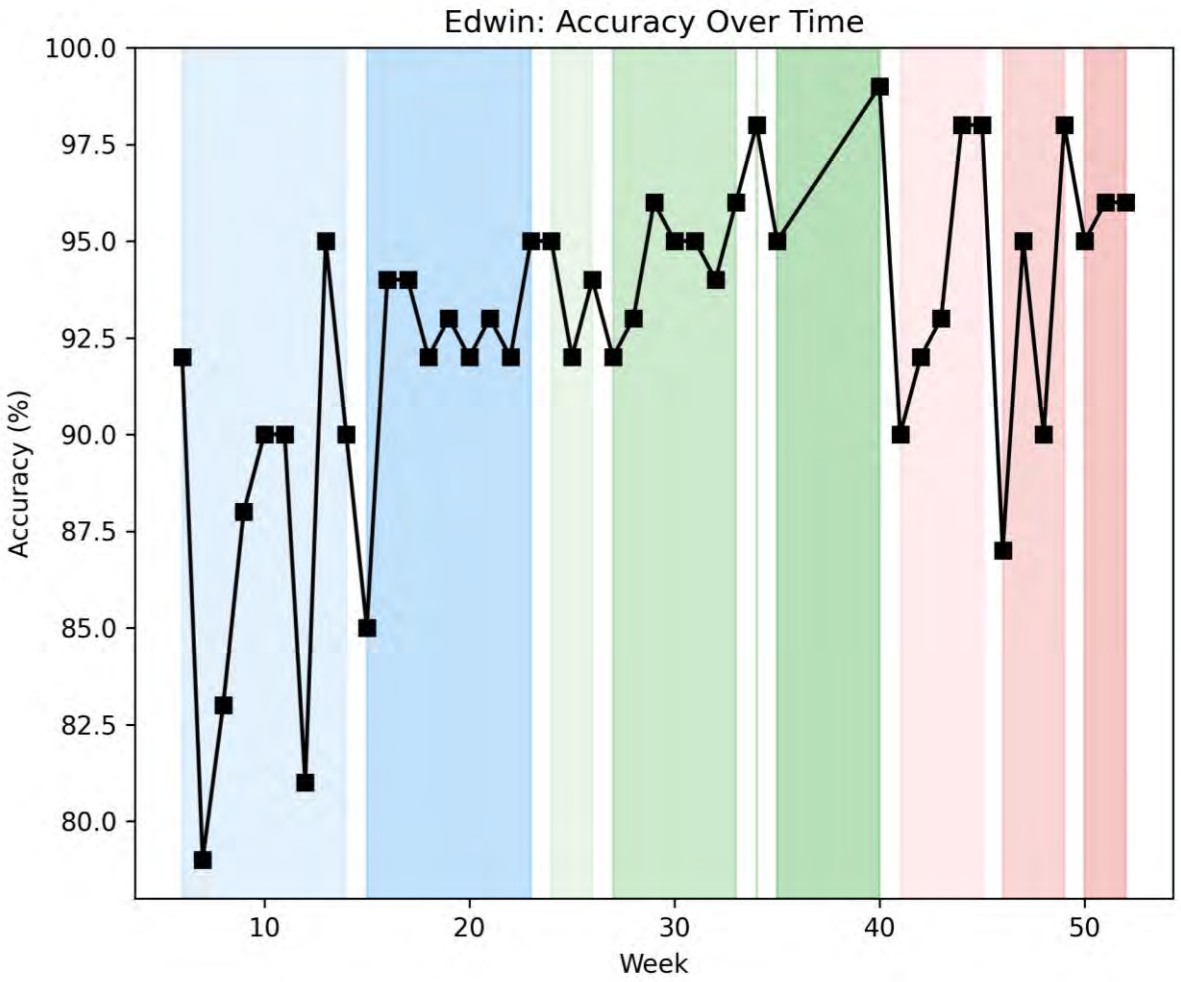
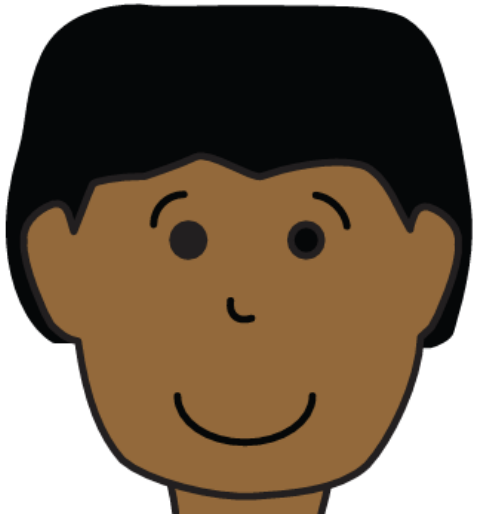
Edwin: Oral Reading Fluency





“Lamar” Age 7



The School to Prison Pipeline

Diagnosis: Other Health Impairment (ADHD)

IQ (KBIT): 70

Began FOTB at level 1 and completed all 14 levels in 36 instructional weeks.

Received a total of 49.33 hours of one-on-one*, pull-out instruction with an average of 1.37 hours per week.

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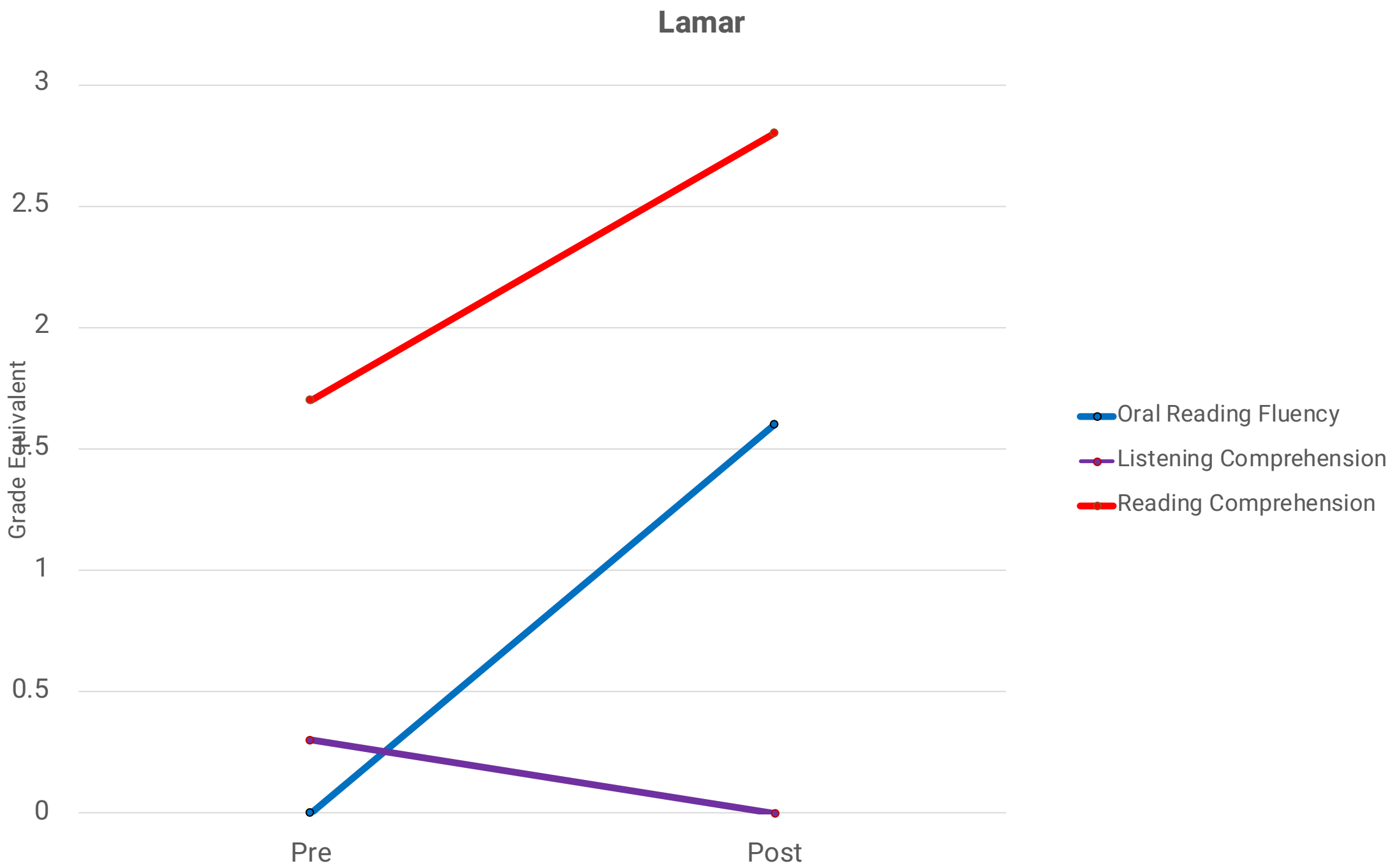
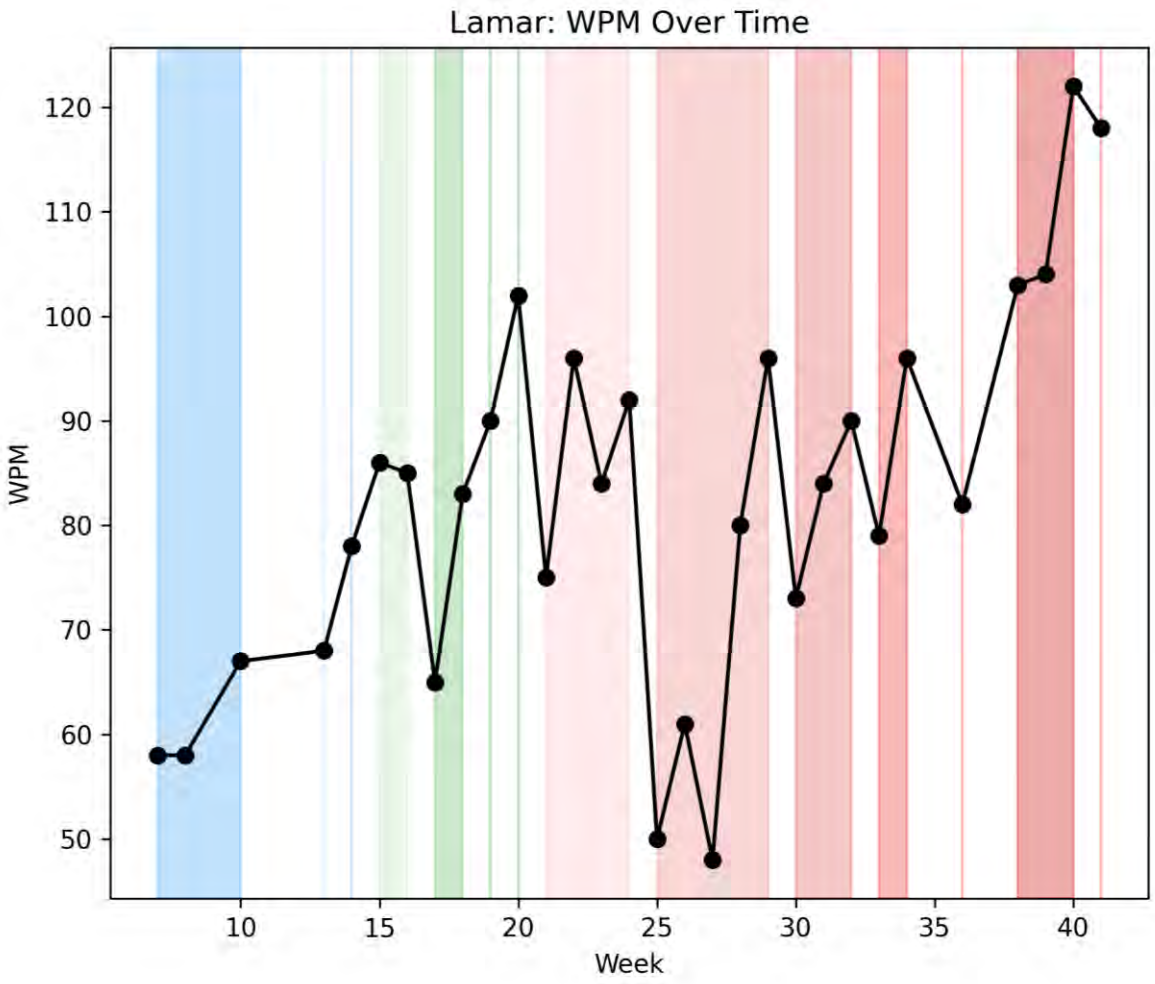
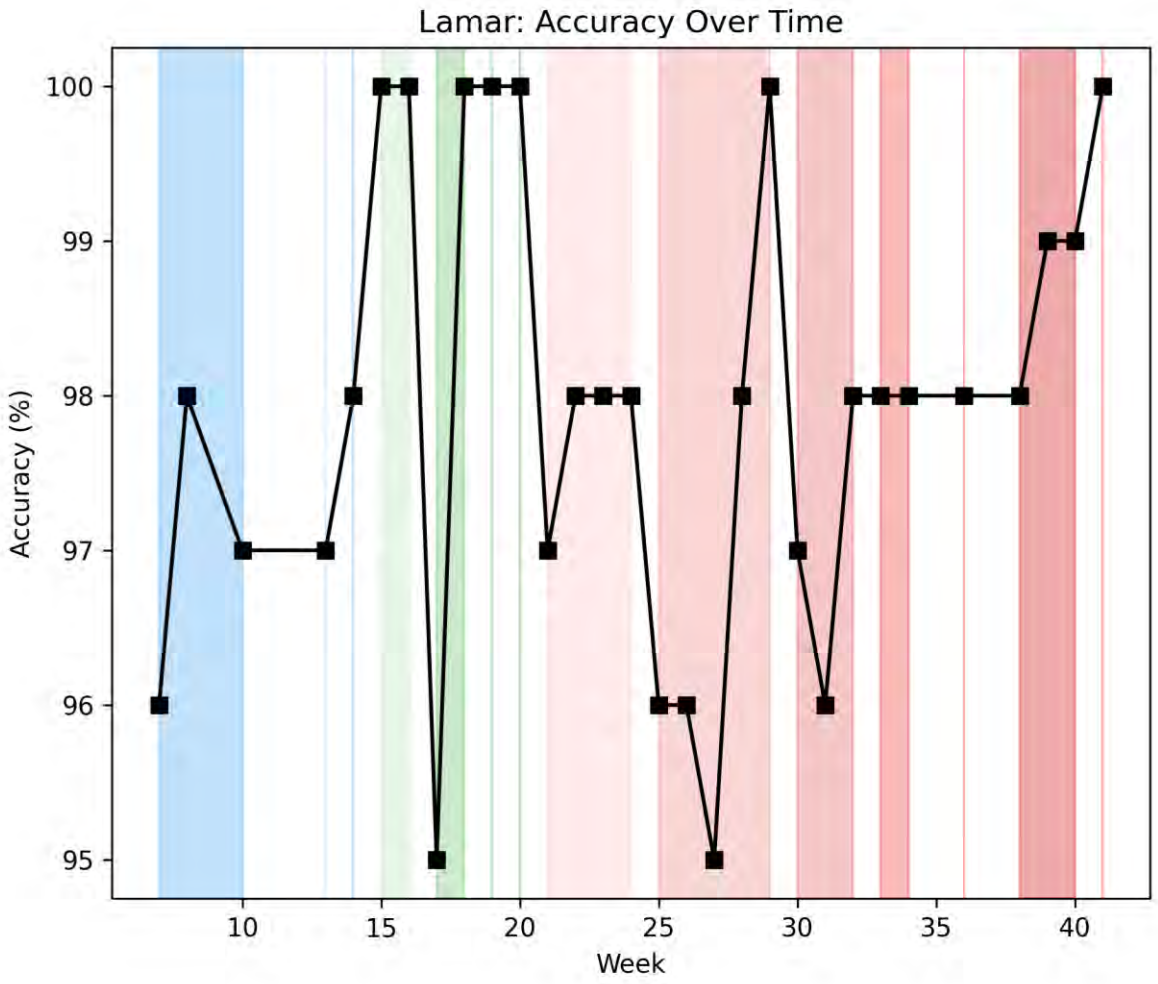
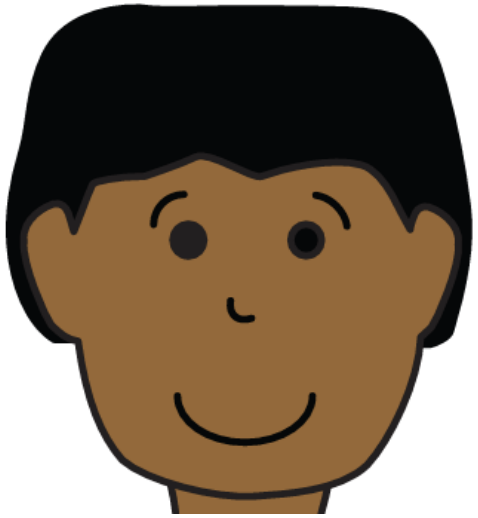

Lamar
3
2.5
2
1.5
1
0.5
0
Grade Equivalent
Pre
Post
Oral Reading Fluency
Listening Comprehension
Reading Comprehension

Lamar: Oral Reading Fluency





“Ben” Age 9



The Importance of Reading Confidence

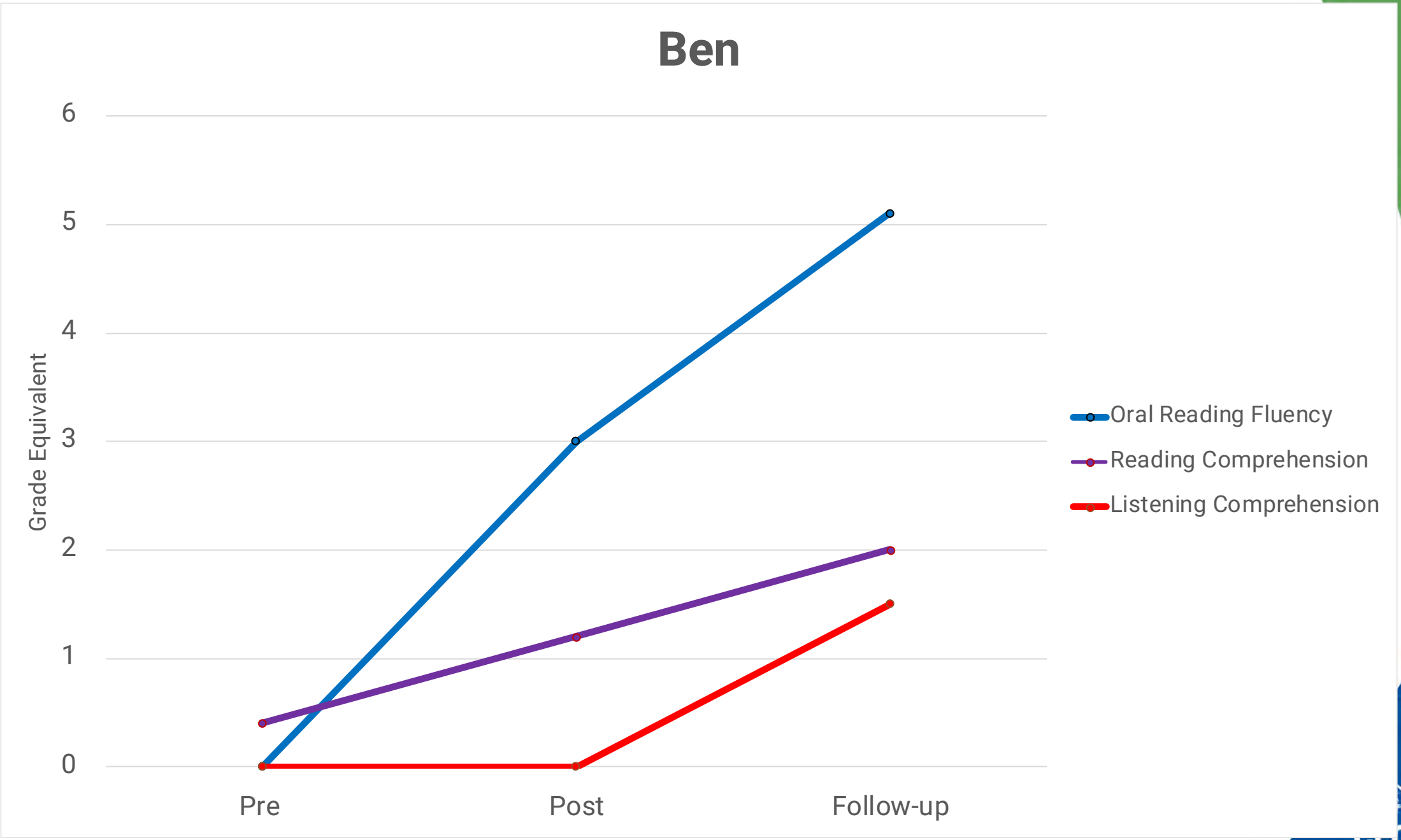
Diagnosis: Developmental Disability

IQ (KBIT): 63 (School Provided IQ: 66 Battelle

Began FOTB at level 1 and completed all 14 levels in 42 instructional weeks.

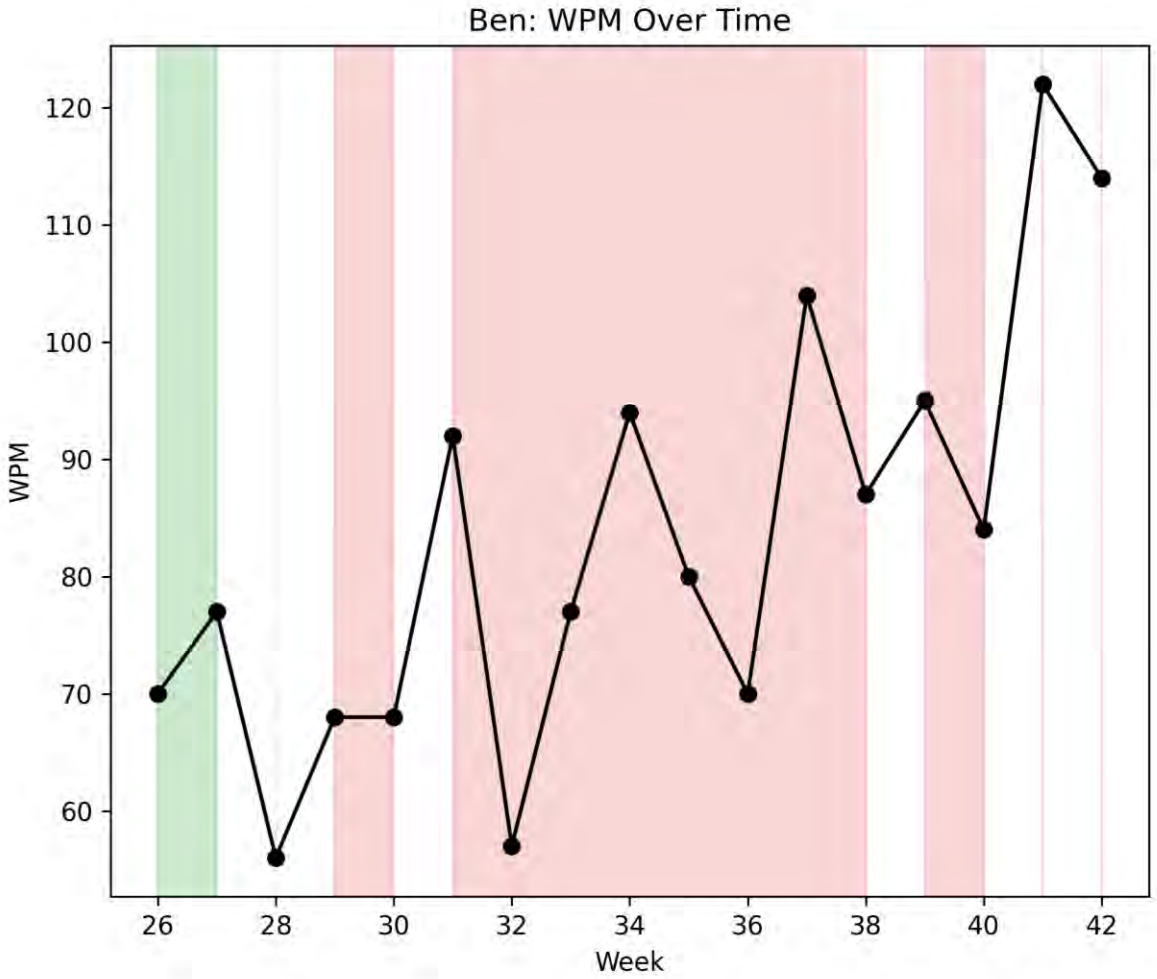
Received a total of **65** hours of one-on-one, pull-out instruction with an average of **1 hour and 33 minutes** per week.

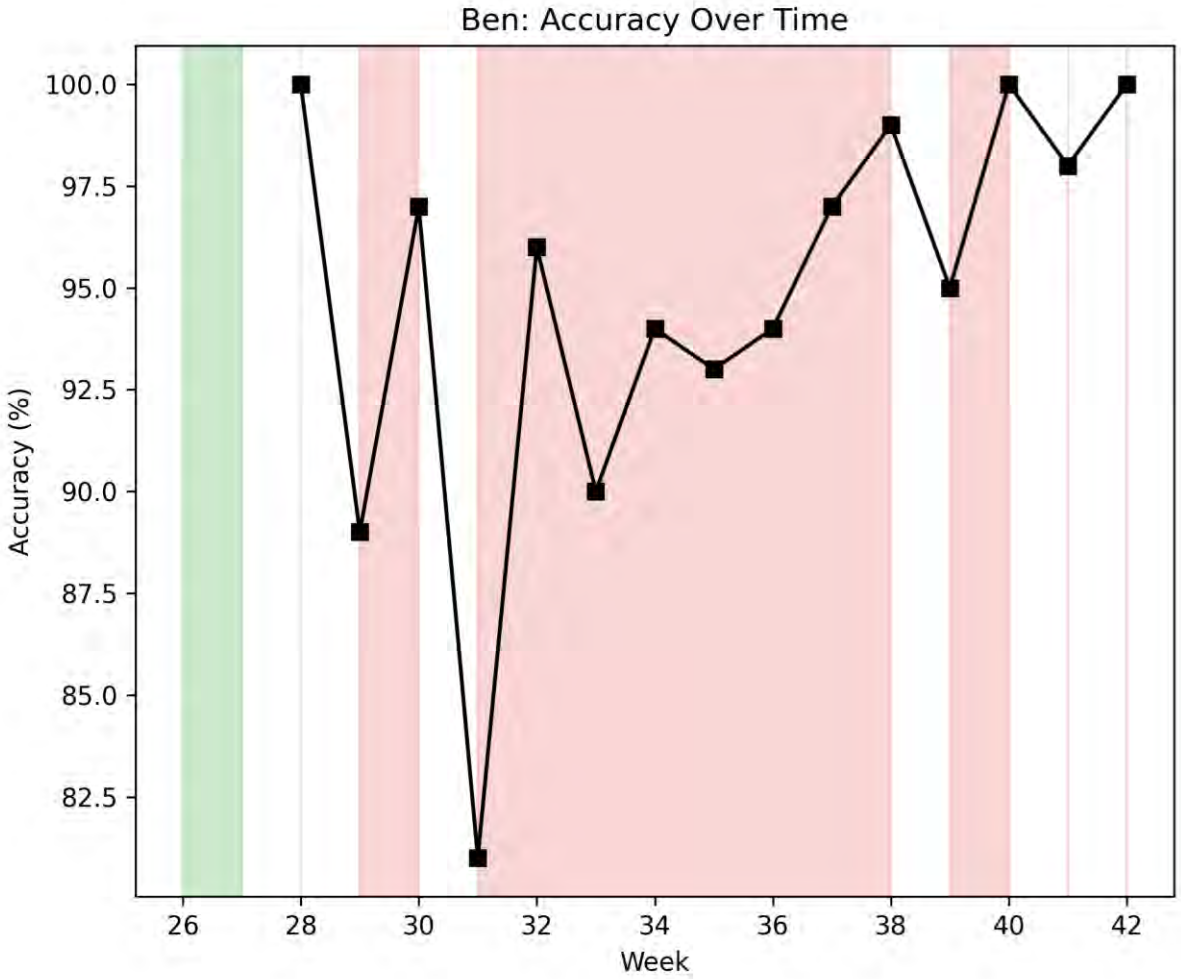
CEC 2026


Ben
6
5
4
3
2
1
0
Grade Equivalent
Pre
Post
Follow-up
Oral Reading Fluency
Reading Comprehension
Listening Comprehension

CEC 2026

Ben: Oral Reading Fluency





“Shelly” Age 9

The Importance of Reading Confidence

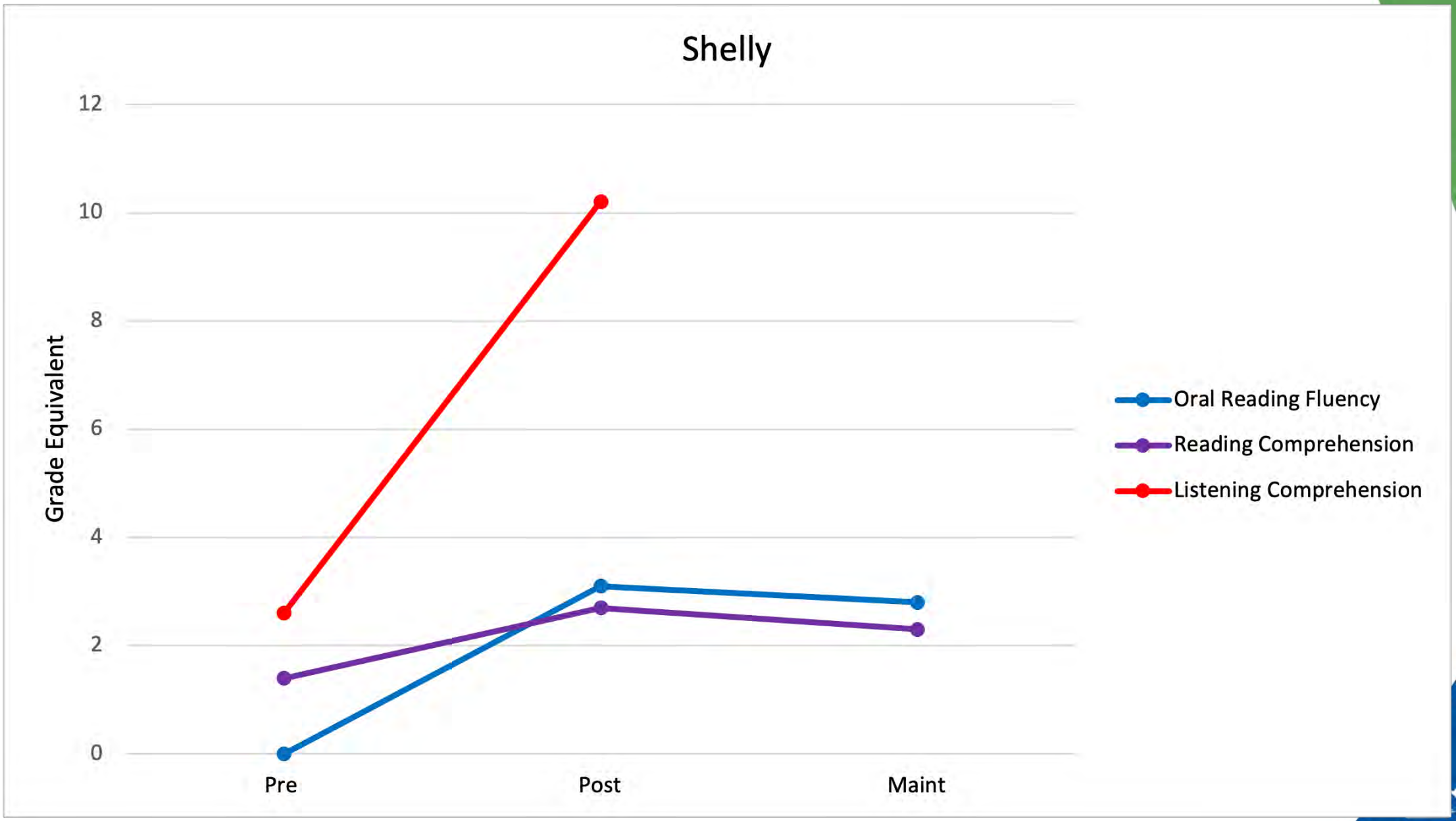
Diagnosis: Specific Learning Disability

IQ (KBIT): 104 (School Provided IQ: 100

Began FOTB at level 5 and completed all 14 levels in 26 instructional weeks

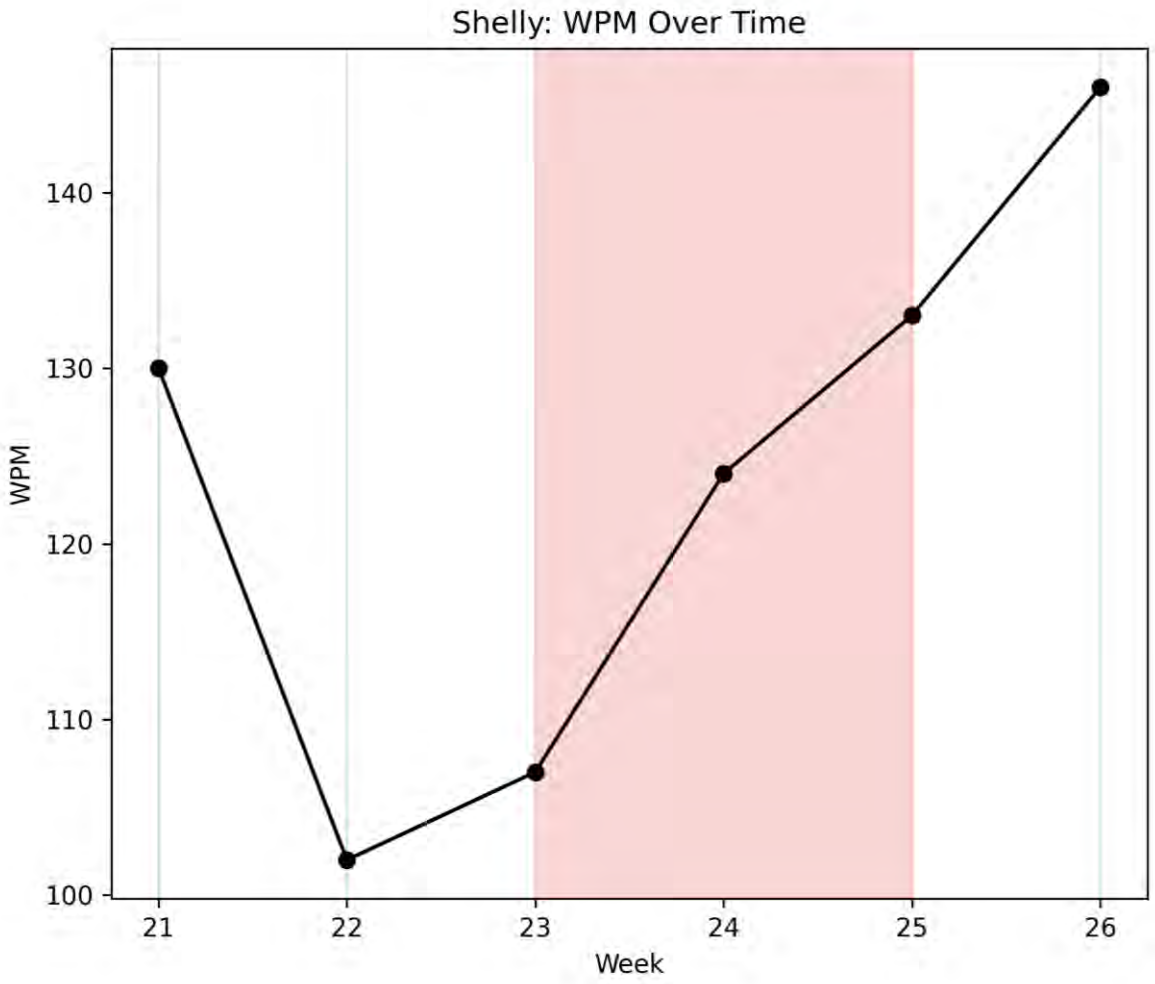
Received a total of **40.3 hours** of small group, pull-out instruction with an average of **1 hour and 33 minutes** per week.

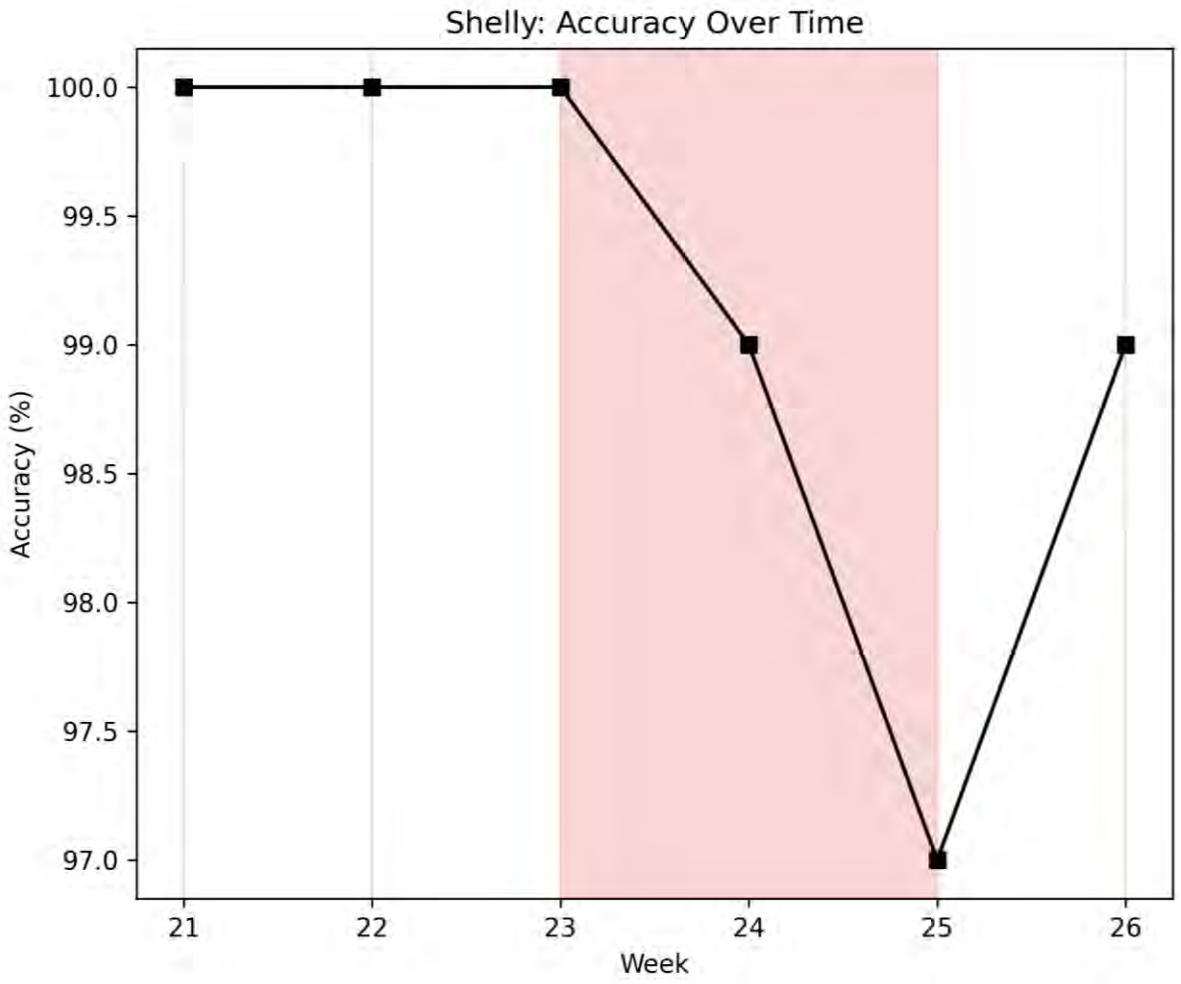
CEC 2026


Shelly
12
10
8
6
4
2
0
Grade Equivalent
Pre
Post
Maint
Oral Reading Fluency
Reading Comprehension
Listening Comprehension

CEC 2026

Shelly: Oral Reading Fluency





Questions

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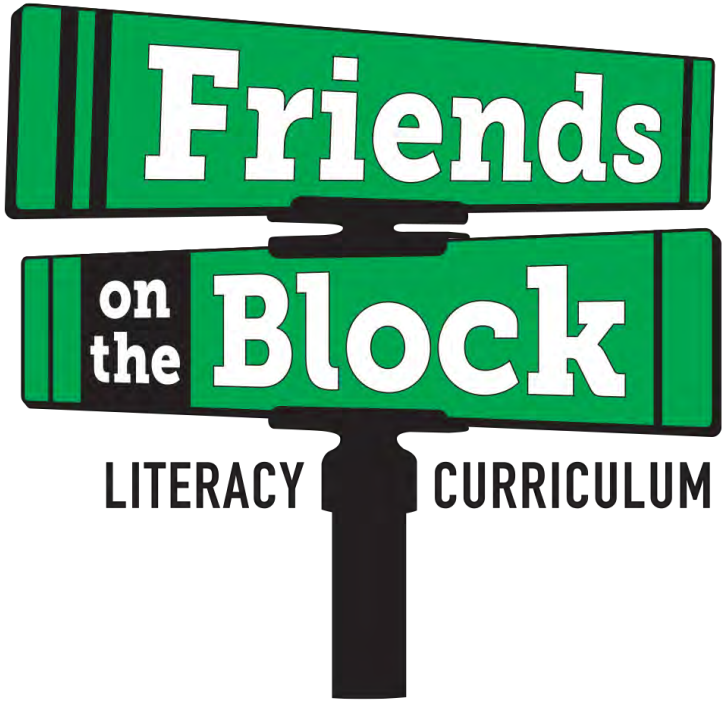
SPECIAL EDUCATION
CONVENTION & EXPO
SALT LAKE CITY
MARCH 11-14, 2026

For More Information on Friends on the Block



Overview & Demonstration Videos

FREE Materials

OSF Registries

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CEC 2026

Thank you!

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