
Review of the POPS Reading Programme

The POPS Reading Programme has been devised in consultation with a range of professionals, including specialist teachers and speech and language therapists. It offers a carefully structured approach to developing early reading skills and spoken language competence. The materials are very appropriate for pupils with specific speech and language impairments receiving specialist provision, but could also be used in a mainstream setting with pupils who have special educational needs, including those with reading difficulties.

The CD-ROM presents a variety of useful resources, including the *Pops Family Introduction Book*, introducing the characters and settings, and related worksheets and games. Perhaps some simple cloze and comprehension activities would have been a useful addition to develop syntactic and semantic skills. A comprehensive manual for teachers and parents sets out the principles of the programme and provides lots of practical strategies for maximising its potential as a teaching tool.

The reading books feature the Pops family – Mum and Dad and their children, Ben, Milly, Don and the youngest, Kal, who has Down syndrome. The stories are of everyday events familiar to young readers, such as Mum losing her car keys, Dad getting stressed at the local burger bar and Milly and Kal painting their belly buttons! The books cover a variety of topics, including animals, toys and transport, and use a combination of core vocabulary and high frequency words. The texts employ concise, straightforward sentences, some of which repeat phrases to promote prediction skills and to ensure over-learning.

There is a progression across the four sets of books and although this is gradual and moves the reader forward in small, manageable steps, there may be pupils with more pronounced difficulties who would benefit from additional parallel sets. Pictures are clear, colourful and visually explicit, supporting emergent readers' early attempts to decode print. Key words located at the bottom of each page and

on a word lotto game build a sight vocabulary, while the Slider game, with its attractive red wooden elephant and onset and rime cards, is a fun way of developing children's phonological awareness.

At the end of each book is an extremely helpful section called 'Developing Language Skills'. These 'speech therapist scripts' provide teachers and parents with a structure to encourage narrative recall, raise questions about characters' actions and feelings and explore vocabulary around a given category, such as toys. Not only does this support language and communication skills but it also helps to develop reading comprehension. The children in my speech and language centre loved the cartoon-like illustrations, responded positively to the characters and could relate to the themes. 'My brother paints his tummy!' giggled one, while another raised her eyebrows, saying, 'My mum *always* loses her keys!'

The POPS Reading Programme has broad-based appeal and although aimed at pupils with speech, language and communication difficulties, could be used with a wider range of children. The inclusion of the mischievous Kal presents a positive image of a differently-abled child, offering a useful starting point for discussion in PSHE sessions. The materials are underpinned by a sound knowledge of reading and language development and are well thought out and user friendly. There are lots of useful practical ideas and the programme is well structured without being over prescriptive.

I look forward to using it again with my pupils and would not hesitate to recommend it to colleagues.

Review by Andrew Taylor, teacher in charge, primary school speech and language centre.