RESEARCH BRIEF

Intensive Tutoring in a Summer Program

What 15 Hours of One-on-One Instruction Added

UFLI
University of Florida Literacy Institute

*Students who arrived at a three-week summer program furthest behind made real gains, but **only on the decoding skills the tutoring directly taught**. Fluency with connected text did not move.*

The UFLI-Intensive model

UFLI-Intensive is a one-on-one tutoring model developed at the University of Florida Literacy Institute for students with dyslexia and other significant reading difficulties. It is explicit, systematic, and multisensory, following a scope and sequence that moves through phoneme–grapheme associations, syllable types, syllable division patterns, and basic spelling rules. A pre-intervention assessment locates each student on that sequence. Every hour-long session runs four 15-minute steps (skill and concept review, spelling, a new concept, and reading connected text), with the tutor modeling, prompting, and providing immediate corrective feedback throughout.

GRADES
Grades 1-5

ASSESSMENT
CORE Phonics, TOWRE-2, ORF

DURATION
3 weeks (15 tutoring hours)

What we set out to learn

Summer is when struggling readers lose ground. Summer Adventures in Literacy, a three-week program at a university laboratory school in the Southeast, gives elementary students with or at risk for reading disabilities four hours of evidence-based literacy instruction each day. Students whose oral reading fluency fell below a grade-specific cut score also received an hour of one-on-one UFLI-Intensive tutoring, 15 sessions and 15 hours in all. Because the cut score was applied consistently to every student, we could ask a sharper question than whether the summer program worked: what did individual tutoring add, over and above a strong group program?

What we found

Tutored students made statistically significant growth on every measure except the two timed standardized word-reading subtests, and on 63% of outcomes that growth was medium or larger. Students in the group-only condition made significant growth on just two of sixteen measures. The contrast is striking because the tutored students started far behind, averaging 26 correct words per minute on oral reading fluency at pretest against 82 for their peers. The regression discontinuity analysis, which compares students just on either side of the eligibility cut score, confirmed an added benefit on two decoding outcomes: reading words with r-controlled vowels (d = 0.71) and words with consonant blends and short vowels (d = 0.54). Both are moderate and, in a three-week window, clinically meaningful.

Decoding skills before and after tutoring, CORE Phonics Survey

Decoding skill	Pre	Post	Growth (d)
Short vowel sounds	3.9	5.0	**0.81**
Consonant sounds	17.6	20.3	**0.79**
Short vowels, digraphs & -tch	7.3	11.5	**0.74**
R-controlled vowels	5.5	9.4	**0.58**
Consonant blends with short vowels	8.1	11.1	**0.57**

Mean CORE Phonics Survey subtest scores for the 37 students who received UFLI-Intensive tutoring, with within-group effect sizes. All five gains were statistically significant; students receiving the group program alone showed significant growth on only one of these subtests. Effect sizes of 0.20 are small, 0.50 medium, and 0.80 large.

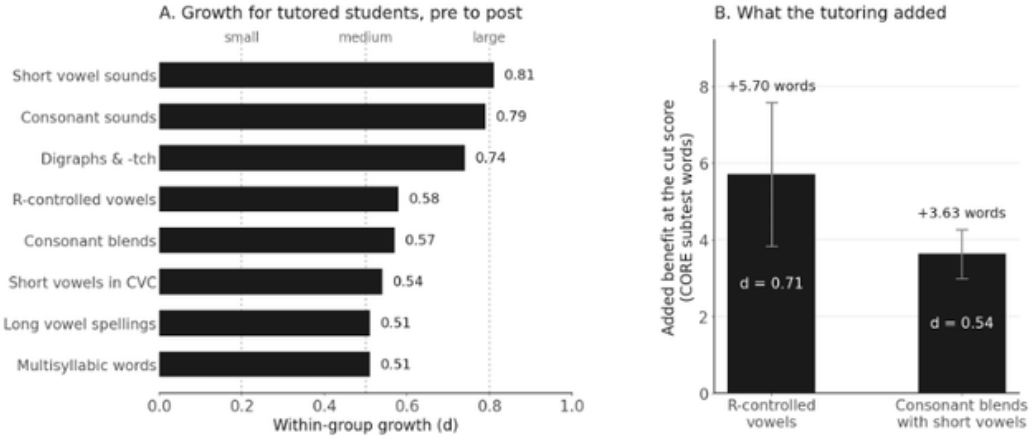


Figure 1. *Within-group growth for tutored students across decoding skills (left), and the added benefit of tutoring estimated at the eligibility cut score for the two outcomes with significant discontinuities (right). Error bars show ±1 standard error.*

Where the gains landed, and where they didn't

The effects concentrated on decoding and stopped there. Neither group improved significantly on the timed standardized word-reading measures, and the tutoring produced no detectable added benefit for oral reading fluency with connected text. Two things likely explain the pattern. The standardized measures report scaled scores, which move slowly across three weeks. And fluency is built on secure decoding rather than trained head-on, so the skills the tutoring targeted first are precisely the ones that moved. For programs, the implication is that a short, intensive summer dose can repair the foundation, but fluency will need more time or additional support.

What made it work

Three features are worth naming. The instruction was individually placed: a pre-intervention assessment put each student at the right point in the scope and sequence rather than at a common starting point. It was dense: one tutor, one student, an hour a day, with many opportunities to respond and immediate correction. And it was delivered with structure. Preservice teachers completed two and a half days of training, tutored a peer before working with a child, and were formally observed five times against a checklist of expected lesson elements, with feedback within hours of each observation. Attendance held: all 37 students received all 15 planned sessions.

What it means for programs

Summer programs that want to move foundational skills should consider layering an individual dose on top of group instruction rather than choosing between the two. The added benefit here came from one hour a day across fifteen days, delivered by trained preservice teachers, a staffing model within reach of districts partnered with a teacher preparation program. Screening matters as much as the tutoring. Students flagged by the fluency cut score scored lower on every measure at pretest, confirming that the screen sent the right students to the more intensive support.

About the analysis

Findings come from 62 first- through fifth-grade students with complete pre- and post-test data who attended a three-week summer literacy program at a university laboratory school in the southeastern United States; 37 qualified for and received one-on-one UFLI-Intensive tutoring based on grade-specific oral reading fluency cut scores. Within-group growth was tested with paired-samples t-tests and dependent effect sizes. The added benefit of tutoring was estimated with a sharp regression discontinuity design using non-parametric local linear regression within Imbens–Kalyanaraman optimal bandwidths; the McCrary density test found no evidence that assignment around the cut score was manipulated ($p = .380$). The sample was small, cut scores differed by grade, no follow-up data were collected after the summer, and the program itself had no control group, so the effects of the group instruction cannot be separated from ordinary summer change. Full study: Contesse, V. A., Campese, T., Kaplan, R., Mullen, D., Pico, D. L., Gage, N. A., & Lane, H. B. (2020), *Reading & Writing Quarterly*.