Accelerated Reader
Independent evaluation team: Durham University

👥 Broadgreen High School, Thornaby Academy,Tideway School, St…

📊 Pilot Study

✔ Completed

The project

Accelerated Reader (AR) is a whole-group reading management and monitoring programme that aims to foster the habit of independent reading among primary and early secondary age pupils. The internet-based software initially screens pupils according to their reading levels, and suggests books that match their reading age and reading interest. Pupils take computerised quizzes on the books they have read and earn AR points related to difficulty.

The evaluation of Accelerated Reader involved 349 pupils in Year 7 who had not achieved secure National Curriculum Level 4 in their primary Key Stage 2 (KS2) results for English (across four secondary schools). 166 pupils were randomly allocated to receive the intervention for 22 weeks in phase one during their first year at secondary school, with the other 183 acting as a control and then receiving the intervention in phase two. 10 pupils left their existing schools and were unable to provide post-test data despite follow-up. The intervention was organised either by taking pupils out of regular classes or making pupils stay after regular school time. The pattern varied between schools.

This was a different kind of study to the trials usually funded by the EEF. In 2013, four secondary schools applied independently to EEF for funding to set up a programme for AR, and simultaneously evaluate its impact in their own schools. Each application was deemed too small in scale to run a successful evaluation of the programme, but if the schools involved were to co-operate then the scale would be sufficient for an 'aggregated' efficacy trial. Efficacy trials seek to test evaluations in the best possible conditions to see if they hold promise.

Grants were given directly to schools to run the trial, including randomisation and testing, as well as implementing the intervention. Each school ran a small trial of AR in isolation, and made all of the relevant evaluation decisions such as randomly allocating pupils to the control or intervention group.

Researchers at Durham University were assigned as independent evaluators for this trial. Their roles were to advise the school leads on the process of conducting research, randomisation and testing, and to aggregate the eventual results from all schools. Online testing was done by an external company (GL), although delivered by the schools themselves, and the independent evaluators were provided with access to the results. The schools managed the administration of the online tests.

GROUP	NO. OF PUPILS	EFFECT SIZE	ESTIMATEDMONTHS' PROGRESS	EVIDENCE STRENGTH**	COST
Intervention vs Control (all pupils)	339	+0.24	+3 months	🔒🔒🔒🔓🔓	£ £ £ £ £
Intervention vs Control (FSM)	115	+0.38	+5 months	N/A	£ £ £ £ £
**For more information about evidence ratings, see Appendix 1 in the main evaluation report. Evidence ratings are not provided for sub-group analyses, which will always be less secure than overall findings.					
For more information about cost ratings, see Appendix 2 in the main evaluation report.					

What impact did it have?

The intervention group exposed to Accelerated Reader recorded higher literacy scores than the control group, using the GL Assessment New Group Reading Test. The overall effect size of +0.24 is the equivalent of approximately 3 months of additional progress in reading age after 22 weeks. The evaluation also indicates a positive impact for FSM-eligible pupils although as the numbers of pupils in the sub-groups are smaller, these findings are less secure than the overall finding. This is independent of the precise age, sex, first language, ethnicity, and special education needs of the pupils. If replicated, the intervention has a good chance of delivering similar results in similar conditions.

The evaluation team observed the implementation of the project and considered it to be generally well conducted, and attractive to teachers and pupils.

On the basis of this aggregated trial, it appears that schools are able to lead evaluations of their own practice given the two conditions that applied in the situation described here. It represents a more 'real world' approach to evaluation, akin to schools buying an intervention and implementing it themselves with no external support. However, the findings here suggest that it is necessary for schools to be trained and supported by independent experts, and it is helpful that the developers of the intervention are not involved at all.

How secure is this finding?

The evaluation was set up as a 'waiting list' efficacy trial with the control group receiving AR after the intervention group and after both groups had completed the post-intervention test. The control group initially carried on with 'business as usual' and were not given access to the programme.

Four secondary schools participated and 349 pupils were involved in the study (with 10 dropping out). The schools participated from different regions of the country. This participation was based on school leaders' initiatives to implement the intervention and their willingness to become a part of this research project. However, the trial itself does not demonstrate that the findings hold at a similar scale in all types of schools or for other age groups.

A number of statistical techniques were applied to check whether the results are due to chance or bias caused by dropout. The security rating is considered to be three padlocks.

To view the project's evaluation protocol click here.

How much does it cost?

The direct cost to schools is for the annual licence to use Accelerated Reader for each individual pupil. A minimum subscription rate for 50 pupils is £450, or £9 per pupil. One day teacher's training cost is included in the subscription licence and the schools also have year-long access to a free hotline telephone service.

Key conclusions

Accelerated Reader appears to be effective for weaker readers as a catch-up intervention at the start of secondary school.

A well-stocked library with a wide collection of books banded according to the Accelerated Reader readability formula, and easy access to computers with internet connection, are the main requirements for successful implementation.

Pupils at very low levels of reading may not be independent readers and would need initial support from teacher to start reading books.

Schools can lead robust evaluations of their own planned interventions, under favourable circumstances, and with some advice and oversight from expert evaluators.