

Learner J had been working through lockdown in-cell and was near completion of his Level 1 Functional Skills English Reading, before his tutor was able to visit him on the wing in person to discuss exam readiness. She gave him a short reading task and was shocked to find he could not read any of it. She gave him an E3 text and found he was unable to read most of that. On questioning, he admitted his cell mate had read everything to him, but his answers were his own.

SENCo intervention was requested to identify what could be done to help this young man (age 23) to complete his reading exam. On discussion, J explained that letters moved around on the page, and he struggled to follow them. He had tried using different fonts and coloured paper/overlays, with no improvement. J reported that he did attend school, where he had additional support, but thinks the only qualification he obtained was an internal school certificate in reading.

He stated many people had tried to teach him to read but he must “just be thick, because it doesn’t go in”. On a standardised reading test, J was discovered to be functioning at the level expected for someone aged 6 years and 3 months. A further test was administered, which showed his ability to process written information with no reading requirement was at the same level, indicating a lack of reading opportunity was not the cause, but there was an underlying deficit.

J was shown the reading pen and asked to try it on a random piece of text. He took to it very quickly and was soon accurately scanning the text and listening to it via headphones. He was then asked to try the reading test again, but this time to scan the words and repeat them aloud. This he was able to do with a wide range of multisyllabic words, some quite complex, and to demonstrate that he understood them by giving a definition. For unfamiliar words (such as “terpsichorean”) he was shown how to use the integral dictionary. J did not want to give the pen back. “I can read now!” he said proudly. J was issued with a pen, initially to use whenever he is in the Education block. He has been switched to an E3 qualification to enable him to gain an accredited qualification as quickly as possible to boost his confidence, with a view to immediate progression back to Level 1.

J was given the new ReaderPen Secure rather than the ExamReader, which had previously been used in his prison, and was the first learner to receive one. This could not have happened at a better time for J, because his visual disturbances and lack of phonic knowledge make using a paper dictionary all but impossible. He is a very motivated young man, keen to turn his life around and to increase his vocabulary saying, “I can find the word I need to say what I want to say!”

When asked what difference the technology would make to him, J said; “If this works, I can get a job, can’t I? When I get out of here, I can get a job. And that means I won’t be coming back!”

– Janet Christmas of Novus