John Williams' Column: Reading Pen II Builds Language Skills Among People With Learning Disabilities

23-year-old Richard Cortez took a long look at the Reading Pen II. He had been standing outside the periphery of the booth at the California State University of Northridge (CSUN) annual assistive technology conference. He approached the booth and the Reading Pen with caution. He asked the salesman, Steven Heller, “Is the Reading Pen as good as I have heard?”

“The Reading Pen is a portable assistive technology device enabling people with reading difficulties, learning disabilities or dyslexia to quickly and easily scan a word and hear it spoken aloud,” Heller said as he handed the Pen to Cortez. Heller pointed out that the Pen is really a scanner and can’t be used to write anything.

Cortez picked up the Pen and held it in both hands. He looked at the wide optical head that scans font sizes. Several times he turned the button on and off. He looked at the LCD display and saw the word scanner and its definition. He played with the arrow buttons that navigated through the various menu options, and he listened to the text-to-speech technology that read the word scanner and its definition.

“What else can it do?” he asked the salesman.

“What do you want it to do?”

“To help me read. To help me improve my language understanding,” a frustrated and angry Cortez said.

Standing behind Cortez, 19-year-old Michael Faraday showed an equally intense interest in the Reading Pen. Like Cortez he has a learning disability. “When I read my mind can’t process information the same other people’s minds do. It is difficult for me to retain what I read.”

Faraday’s goal is to become a writer. “When I am reading, I frequently have to stop and open a dictionary for definitions. Having to do this slows me down,” said an irritated Faraday, who is slightly visually impaired and can’t afford a computer.

I watched others in the crowd nod their heads. Three other people in the crowd told me they had various degrees of learning disabilities.

Cortez and Faraday are among the millions of people in the United States with learning disabilities. And increasingly they are turning to assistive technology products to find a solution. They recognize that their futures depend on a technological solution.

“I am struggling with my courses. If I fail, so does my future and my family’s,” Cortez told me. He put the Pen down and returned to the salesman.

The three-ounce weight of the Pen makes it portable. Cortez says, “I could carry it in my clothes.” Cortez also believes the Pen can help him improve his English since it is his second language.

While reading, one can use the Reading Pen to scan unrecognized words, which, along with their definitions, can be displayed and spoken through the built-in speaker. The Pen contains in its memory the American Heritage College Dictionary. A user can also scan a full line of text and read it aloud. The Pen recognizes bold, italic and underlined fonts ranging from 6 to 22 points, and it keeps a record of the last 80 words scanned. A front keypad and central optical head make the Pen usable by both left- and right-handed users.

“Hearing words spoken out loud can help Cortez and Faraday improve their reading

comprehension," said Laura Darrow, an adult special education teacher in Los Angeles, California. She has used the first version of the Pen. In fact, she introduced her class, including Cortez and Faraday, to the first version, and was here with other learning disabled students to learn about this version and its benefits to students with learning disabilities.

An output socket for earphones that allows for private listening is another plus for Reading Pen users. "Noise is a disrupting influence for people with learning disabilities trying to concentrate. The earphones improve their concentration," Darrow said.

"School systems must acquire more assistive technology developed to assist students with learning disabilities," Darrow said. "We can't leave Cortez and Faraday behind educationally. Even if the Pen helps them minimally, it is enough to build their confidence as learners." She intends to include half a dozen of these Pens in next year's budget.

How effective is the Pen? Two users I found, who did not want their names mentioned, told me it serves their purposes very well. One of them, a lawyer, uses it daily. He said, "It is a great tool for people like myself with learning disabilities. It does what it says it does and no more."

The second person, a university medieval English teacher who is dyslexic, said, "It has helped me tremendously. I retain more of what I read when I use it. I know my comprehension has increased."

Cortez, who has used it for three months says, "I see an improvement in my understanding of the English language, and my ability to learn."

Manufactured by Wizcom Technologies in Acton, MA, the price of the Reading Pen II is $279. A manual, carrying case, earphone and 2 AAA batteries are included. I would recommend buying rechargeable batteries and a battery charger.

Darrow thinks the price is high for schools to buy it in bulk quantities. Besides, she says, "This is an individual tool. For it to be effective, the users must have it with them all the time."

No one, not even the manufacturers, believes the Reading Pen II is an end-all solution to solving the learning problems people with learning disabilities encounter daily. Rather they recognize it as one more tool to help people with learning disabilities.

So be it!

The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author, and not necessarily those of the National Organization on Disability.

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