

Evaluation of Kurzweil 3000 – October 15, 2007  
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I chose to work with the Kurzweil 3000 software because our district special education director just bought 6 copies for each of our elementary schools and 6 Apple Mac laptops. Our middle school has used the program for four years and now has 10 licenses that they use throughout the school from the network so up to 10 students can use it at any one time. Special educators throughout the district are going to receive training on this program so this is very timely.

I used the program with a 7<sup>th</sup> grade middle school student, Carl, who has learning disabilities. He had not used the program before and I worked with him in a separate lab room and initially introduced him to the program's interface. We tried a few different voices, a few different reading speeds, and changed the colors until he felt comfortable with the basic reading function. After a few minutes of reading, I then showed him the study skills tools including the color highlighting and sticky notes. I let him work with those for several more minutes and then I showed him the word definition. This was enough material to introduce in an initial session and since I only had this one opportunity to work with Carl, I wanted to see how far he would get in learning new features. In a more realistic setting, I probably would have gone slower and let him master skills more between sessions before adding new features. Carl seemed very interested in using and learning this program. He was engaged through much of our session and seemed to like the reading. At the end of the session I asked if he thought he would like to work with this program more and he said he would.

I talked for quite a while with the middle school special educator who has worked with this program for four years now. She has worked with a wide variety of students and has had a lot of successes. She feels the value of the program is shown in the amount many students use it for their writing. She said when the students hear what they write, they quickly pick up on missed words (one of the most common problems), misspellings, wrong words, and grammatical problems. Some use the word predictor and vocabulary lists a lot. The amount and quality of their writing improves dramatically and the students want to use the program whenever they have writing to do. Each student is quite different in the way they use the program that it ends up being quite specialized, depending on their abilities and disabilities, how competently they learn the technology and how engaged they are in taking the time to learn the program and those factors vary widely.

The flexibility of this software and the variety of features it offered were quite impressive. The number of factors that the user can control make it very tailorable to each user and provides the student a sense of

independence – they can use the computer themselves, often without adult invention, and set it up and use it just how it suits them best.

The checklists provided by Higgins, Boone and Williams in *Evaluating Educational Software for Special Education* provide a “multidimensional approach for evaluating educational software for use with specific students with disabilities”. They offer suggestions for evaluations based on student needs, teacher options, software and screen design, sound, feedback and instructional design that may assist you in deciding if the program is worth evaluating. In the case of Kurzweil 3000, the use of a 30-day trial provides you the opportunity to try it with a student for a reasonable period of time and see if it works for them.

I was particularly interested in the use of the program for improving reading for students with attention disorders, as I have a son who has ADD and is not comfortable with his reading abilities. He avoids reading. His rate of reading and distractibility are key factors. Hecker (2002) refers to “canceled mind trips” that a student refers to their mind wandering and lapses of attention. Their study concluded that the software assisted many students with attention disorders, just as it does for students with learning disabilities, and allowed student to attend better to their reading, reduce distractibility and read for longer periods of time. I’m anxious to offer this program as an option to my son and see if it makes a difference for him. It appears to help with a percentage of students with attention disorders so I think it’s worth a try. It was interesting that the rate improvement results of the Hecker study correlated so closely to Elkind’s 1998 study in that those with very low reading rates benefited the most up to a certain level and those that already had a competent reading rate did not improve or decreased with the use of the reading program.

I found the directions, tutorial, reviewer’s guide, and quick reference all helpful in learning to use and instruct use of the program. The program does have many features that you can’t learn it all at once – you need to focus in on a set of features, learn them, master them and then learn more. This Kurzweil program provides the tools and features that a student needs compared to the built-in features of Windows that I evaluated earlier - the narrator and text-to-speech options. It’s rather expensive but I think after an evaluation period of a few weeks, if the person decides the program provides them the assistance they need, that it is worth their purchase because they can then continue to use it for any of their reading or writing. You can scan documents in, read text from the web, access a variety of books online and read documents in pdf format.

I think there are challenges to offering this program in a school setting but the benefits are so great that we need to work through the difficulties to ensure that students have it available to them if they want to use it. It can take quite a lot of time for some students to learn to use the tool – others pick up on the technology quite quickly. The interface is configurable so you

can turn off toolbars easily or bring them back for a variety of learners. Some of our special education aides have had some difficulty in learning to use the program and this requires time and more training. And as with much technology training, if they don't use it a lot continually they forget. I also found there was a gap between the features the newest version of the program provided and how people were using it – they weren't aware of many of the latest features.

I found the testimonials provided by Kurzweil interesting in that they ranged from students with a variety of disabilities to adults and parents of students with disabilities. The thread of independence that these people feel with the use of this assistive technology was apparent throughout.

## References

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