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Teacher's Newsletter

Applying Research in Reading Instruction For Adults

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What Is Reading?

The definition of reading on page 3 is used by the Partnership for Reading, the National Reading Panel, and the federal Reading First law. According to this definition, reading is "a complex system of deriving meaning from print" that requires:

- an understanding of how speech sounds are related to print,
- decoding (word identification) skills,
- fluency,
- vocabulary and background knowledge,
- active comprehension strategies, and
- a motivation to read.

These key elements define the content of reading instruction, and research provides guidelines for building many of the important skills. This is good news because the need is great.

What Do We Know About Adults' Reading Needs?

Reading opens many doors—to employment, training, higher education, and lifelong learning. Adults who don't read well face serious barriers as they attempt to earn a living wage, to support their children's learning, and to fully participate in civic and community life. They are unable to gain access to a wealth of print information that readers take for granted, and they miss out on the joy of reading for pleasure.

Although we can't say exactly how literate adults need to be, we can say with certainty that most of the parents in family literacy and other basic education programs are seeking higher levels of literacy or English language proficiency to reach their personal, family, and work-related goals.

That's why they enroll in adult education programs.

Most adult learners are employed and working hard to support themselves and to care for their families. Many have developed interpersonal and other skills that have enabled them to function as competent, contributing adults in spite of their lack of basic skills. However, they have hopes for the future, and they believe that education will give them options to improve their lives.

These adults know they need help to achieve their educational goals, but are often unaware of what it will take to do so. In particular, they may not realize the extent to which their reading ability is a barrier to their continued educational progress. Many enroll with the goal of earning a GED® certificate, and expect to reach that goal in a matter of weeks or months. For some, a skills brush-up is sufficient, but most will need to do considerably more work than they anticipate. Some learners need to focus only on math or writing, but for others, the problem is more basic. Reading skill deficits affect performance on nearly every part of the GED® test battery, because they are written tests. Learners with reading problems must address them before they can hope to meet their goals.

The number of adults with reading problems can be estimated based on national surveys. For instance, in 1992, 46% of adults in the U.S had Level 1 or Level 2 literacy skills, the lowest of five levels defined by the National Adult Literacy Survey (Kirsch, Jungeblut, Jenkins, & Kolstad, 1993). (As this book is going to press, new data on adult literacy are being released by the National Center for Educational Statistics.)

How many of these adults are enrolled in ABE or other basic skills programs? The learner groups that programs serve vary, but the Third National Even Start Evaluation (U.S. Department of Education, 2003) gives us an idea of the literacy skills of adult participants in family literacy. This report shows that 11% of adults in Even Start in 2000-2001 participated in adult basic education services at the 0-4 grade level. According to data from the U.S. Department of Education's National Reporting System, in ABE/GED® programs, the number of low-level learners is higher. About 21% of adults in 2001-02 entered with reading skills at 3.9 GE or below (Participants by Entering Functioning Level, 2001-2002 Aggregate).

Clearly these adults need reading instruction. But what about the others? Is reading instruction important only for beginners?

Research tells us that mid-level readers (often the largest percentage of adult learners) have extremely varied reading needs, and although they have learned some word identification skills, they often don't make good use of these skills when reading. When they come to a word they don't recognize, they may use the first few letters and/or context clues to guess rather than decode the word (Davidson & Strucker, 2002).

Other learners need to increase fluency, build vocabulary, or improve comprehension. In other words, although they may not always understand the exact nature of their problems, many adults in basic education programs need to improve their reading. So why don't teachers spend more time on reading?



Challenges in meeting adults' reading needs

In current practice, teachers in many adult education and family literacy classrooms focus on GED® preparation and other goal-related instruction. Of course, many of these adults are not able to read GED® -level textbooks or other goal related materials, but in a multi-level classroom, teachers often feel they can't provide the kind of individualized reading instruction that these adults need. Teachers do the best they can to manage small- and large-group learning activities aimed at what seem to be common needs and rely on workbooks for individualized skills instruction. In the learning lab type of class, adults spend a large portion of their class time working independently on the skills they need, using textbooks or computer-assisted instruction programs, while the teacher circulates to provide help. In some classrooms the teacher is able to provide a volunteer tutor to work one-to-one with a learner who needs extra assistance. This approach evolved in response to the realities of the setting and the learners. The multi-level classroom is common in adult basic skills education. The adults who enroll are busy with other life responsibilities, usually have limited time to give to education, and may be erratic in attendance. For these reasons, teachers often have found that some combination of the activities described above is the only workable way to manage their classes. Beder and Medina (2001) found in most of the adult literacy classrooms they observed "little evidence of teachers systematically assessing learners' needs or evaluating whether instruction met individual or group needs." They also concluded that continuous enrollment and mixed skill levels are very serious problems for adult educators.

Some states are beginning to move away from the multi-level class format and are recommending that programs provide classes designated for specific ability levels. In some urban areas with many classes at various sites, this kind of programming already exists. However, even if the setting allows for individualized instruction, teachers usually have limited information about learners' needs. Armed with a couple of TABE test scores, they are expected to know just what each adult needs and how to go about providing it. It's not surprising that little explicit reading instruction is going on. But now we have access to research (discussed later in this chapter) that tells us that adult learners have widely varying needs, and that we can administer specific assessments to create meaningful learner profiles. We also know now that if we work on those aspects or components of reading that are identified as needs, we might really make a difference for adult learners.

What Are the Components of Reading?

Research has identified five components of reading:

- Phonemic awareness
- Decoding
- Fluency
- Vocabulary
- Comprehension



Each of the first four components plays an important role in facilitating comprehension, which is, of course, what reading is all about.

What Are the Components of Reading Instruction?

Paralleling the reading components are the instructional components:

- Phonemic awareness training
- Phonics instruction
- Fluency development
- Vocabulary development
- Comprehension-strategies instruction

How Do the Components Work Together?

Comprehension is the goal of reading instruction. All of the reading components contribute to the development of comprehension.

Alphabetics: phonemic awareness training and phonics instruction

The foundation for reading is the ability to identify words in print. Word identification skills are often called alphabetics. The term alphabetics refers to phonemic awareness, decoding, and sight-word recognition.

- **Phonemic awareness.** Phonemic awareness is the ability to detect individual speech sounds within words. Phonemic awareness is required for developing accurate decoding skills. Some struggling readers have not acquired this ability, so phonemic awareness may need to be directly taught.

- **Decoding.** Decoding is a word identification skill that involves using letter-sound correspondences to recognize words in print. Decoding at higher skill levels also includes using larger word parts—like syllables, prefixes, and suffixes. Adults with weak decoding skills need explicit and systematic phonics instruction.

Sight words are those a reader recognizes automatically and reads rapidly. Some frequently encountered words, especially those that have phonetically irregular spellings, are initially taught to be recognized on sight, to enhance reading speed and fluency. But even if a reader initially identifies a word by decoding, after many exposures the word is stored in memory and can be quickly recognized. In this way all words eventually become “sight words.”

_ The alphabetics skills of phonemic awareness and decoding are necessary but not sufficient for reading comprehension.

Fluency development

Fluency is vital to comprehension. A fluent reader identifies words rapidly and accurately with little effort, and is therefore able to focus on meaning. A fluent reader also “interprets” while reading to determine appropriate phrasing and expression. This aspect of fluency indicates comprehension of the writer’s message.

Guided repeated oral reading is a recommended strategy for building fluency in beginning and developing readers.

_ Alphabetic skills are required to develop fluency. Fluency is necessary but not sufficient to ensure reading comprehension.

Vocabulary development

Vocabulary is important to reading comprehension in two ways. The beginning reader uses decoding skills to “translate” print into words that are already in his oral vocabulary. At higher reading levels, vocabulary knowledge is critical for understanding increasingly difficult materials. Learners not only need to learn new words; they need to deepen their knowledge of words they already know. Vocabulary instruction should involve direct teaching and context-based approaches.

_ Vocabulary is vital to reading comprehension at all levels.

Comprehension-strategies instruction

Comprehension strategies enable learners to monitor their own understanding as they read and to solve comprehension problems. Teachers provide direct instruction in monitoring and repair strategies.

_ Even accurate, fluent reading does not guarantee comprehension. Specific comprehension strategies may need to be taught.

Teaching the component skills

These components should not be seen as sequential. Students don’t learn the alphabetic skills and then become fluent and then develop vocabulary and then focus on comprehension. Although the foundational alphabetic skills are a primary focus of beginning instruction, in fact, all the components reinforce each other, and as a result, often develop simultaneously. Teachers should address all the necessary components (at appropriate levels of difficulty) in reading lessons (Kruiderier, 2002). In addition, the skills should be taught and practiced not only with drills and workbook exercises, but also with meaningful, authentic (real-life) materials, including texts in content areas like science, social studies, literature, and materials related to work and home life. The National Institute for Literacy’s website, Assessment Strategies and Reading Profiles (www.nifl.gov/readingprofiles/), clearly makes this point: “Reading is a combination of many sub-skills combined to achieve the common goal of comprehension. Teaching reading sub-skills in an authentic setting ensures that there is never a moment when comprehension is not a factor.”

Print-based and Meaning-based Skills

Another way to understand the components is to group them into two categories:

- Print skills—phonemic awareness, decoding, and fluency
- Meaning skills—vocabulary and comprehension

Print skills have to do with reading words accurately and rapidly. When use of these skills is comfortable and automatic, the reader can attend to the meaning of the text, which is the focus of vocabulary and comprehension-strategy instruction. This distinction is not only a helpful simplifier; it also reflects common patterns observed in groups of adult learners.

For instance, reading researchers suggest that adults whose meaning skills are significantly stronger than their print skills present a profile associated with reading disability (Chall, 1994, as cited in Kruidenier, 2002). We now know that most reading disabilities are related to word reading. You may suspect a disability when an adult struggles with print skills—isolated word identification, phonemic awareness, and decoding—but has an adequate oral vocabulary and is capable of understanding text when it is read to her.

English language learners present the opposite profile. They often exhibit stronger word identification abilities and fluency, with relative weakness in the meaning-based components. What holds them back is more likely a limited English vocabulary, not a reading disability. These two types of learners may have fairly similar scores on a silent reading comprehension test and even on a test of word recognition, yet have very different strengths and needs (Davidson & Strucker, 2002). One lesson to be taken from these patterns is that you need to be able to assess adult learners' abilities in the component skills. A silent reading test alone often will not suffice. You have an opportunity to uncover problems that may never before have been identified and addressed. Unless you find out exactly what each learner needs, you will not be able to offer a real second chance at learning.

As you can see, research offers important insights about adult readers. It also provides guidance (or at least suggestions) for practice. As we get to specifics about assessment and instruction in the next chapters, you will see frequent references to adult education research principles. The next section introduces this research and includes a complete list of the principles.

What Does the Adult Education Research Say?

The resource of first resort for adult educators is *Research-Based Principles for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction* (Kruidenier, 2002), a report of the research review done by the Reading Research Working Group (RRWG). Conclusions and suggestions presented in the report are from a fairly small body of experimental and non-experimental research in adult education, about 70 qualifying studies. A series of “emerging principles” described in the report are based on results from at least two experimental studies and any number of non-experimental studies. Findings based on fewer studies are labeled “trends.”

Because very little experimental research on adult reading instruction has been done, the findings are carefully phrased. Note the frequent use of the word *may*, which indicates that further research is required to establish the validity of these results. Relevant findings from the K-12 research are also included in the report as “ideas.” The experimental research on children offers a much larger body of evidence, so where the adult research proved to be limited, the RRWG looked to the data on children. Of course, we can't be sure that these principles apply to adults, but until we have more adult education research, it seems reasonable to make use of this evidence in situations where adult learners and the children in the research have similar characteristics. You should also be aware that most of the adult research was done with native speakers of English. Unless ESOL adults are specifically mentioned, the principles listed on previous page may not apply to them. For additional information on research specific to English language learners, you might consult The Center for Adult English Language Acquisition www.cal.org/caela.

Reading Assessment Profiles

☛ **Principle 1.** When measures of achievement are obtained for each crucial aspect of reading instruction (alphabetic, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension), instructionally relevant patterns of scores, or profiles of adults' strengths and needs in reading, may be observed. These profiles suggest that ABE readers, including those in ESOL programs and those with a reading disability, are very diverse and that any one measure of reading achievement may not be sufficient to identify strengths and needs for instruction.

Alphabetic (Phonemic Awareness and Phonics)

☛ **Principle 2.** Adult non-readers have virtually no phonemic awareness ability and are unable to consistently perform, on their own, almost all phonemic awareness tasks.

☛ **Principle 3.** Adult beginning readers, like all beginning readers including children, perform poorly on phonemic awareness tasks that require phoneme manipulation. The ability to perform more complex operations with phonemes generally increases (in adults without a reading disability) along with reading ability, until word analysis is established.

☛ **Principle 4.** Adult beginning readers, like other beginning readers, have difficulty applying letter-sound knowledge in order to figure out new or unfamiliar words while reading, although they are generally better at recognizing familiar sight words than children who are learning to read.

☛ **Principle 5.** Participation in ABE programs may lead to increases in adult beginning readers' word analysis abilities.

☛ **Principle 6.** Phonemic awareness and/or word analysis instruction may lead to increased achievement in other aspects of reading for adult beginning readers.

☛ **Principle 7.** Word analysis may be taught using approaches that include direct instruction in word analysis along with instruction in other aspects of reading.

Fluency

☛ **Principle 8.** Fluency is an issue for adult beginning readers, intermediate readers, and perhaps for those reading at more advanced ABE levels. There are very large differences between adults with good and poor reading fluency, and adult beginning readers' fluency is similar to the fluency of children who are beginning readers.

☛ **Principle 9.** Fluency may be taught to ABE students and fluency practice may lead to increases in reading achievement.

☛ **Principle 10.** Fluency may be taught using approaches that include the repeated reading of passages of text, words from texts, and other text units.

Comprehension

☛ **Principle 11.** Adults who qualify for ABE have poor functional literacy comprehension achievement. Although they may be able to perform simple comprehension tasks such as recalling ideas from simple stories and locating a single piece of information in a simple text, they are often unable to combine (integrate and synthesize) information from longer or more complex texts.

☛ **Principle 12.** ESL adults, on average, tend to have lower functional literacy comprehension achievement in English; the percentage of ESL adults among the ABE target population is greater than the percentage among the general adult population.

☛ **Principle 13.** Adults with a learning disability tend, on average, to have lower functional literacy comprehension achievement and are over-represented within the ABE target population.

☛ **Principle 14.** Participation in an adult literacy program may lead to an increase in reading comprehension achievement.

☛ **Principle 15.** Providing explicit instruction in reading comprehension strategies may lead to increased reading comprehension achievement.

☛ **Principle 16.** Combining comprehension instruction with instruction in various other components of reading may lead to increased reading comprehension achievement.

Computer technology

☛ **Principle 17.** In general, computer-assisted instruction (CAI) is at least as effective as non-CAI in increasing reading comprehension achievement.

☛ **Principle 18.** The use of CAI may lead to increased reading comprehension achievement.

As you can see, we now have research support for making changes in the way we approach reading instruction. We know that many adults need explicit reading instruction and that addressing deficiencies in aspects or components of reading—like decoding and fluency—will likely pay off. Although the adult education research base is small compared to the research on K-12 reading instruction, we can make some use of what is known about teaching children. In addition, we can look forward to more information on adult learning in the near future. A number of studies are underway to fill in some of our knowledge gaps.

In the meantime, you can use what we have, adapt with care what the children's research has to say, and apply these established principles to make decisions about instruction. This approach is reasonable because the Reading Research Working Group found that the adult education research results were usually compatible with the research on children, not in conflict.

As knowledgeable professionals, you have tools to use in making critical judgments about your practice. Of course, what you do is only half of the equation. Despite your best efforts, without the learners' active participation and commitment, they may not achieve their learning goals.

How Do We Apply What We Know in Working with Adult Learners?

Once you have accepted the challenge that comes with knowing what should be done, how can you help learners understand what they need and make a commitment to do what it takes to improve their skills? The suggestions below are based on the experience of adult education practitioners. They may help you to make the most of what the research says about adults' reading needs. Think about how or whether these ideas apply to the learners in your class.

Building learner awareness of reading needs

- Learn as much as you can about each individual's reading strengths and needs. You will need to do more than one assessment.
- Share the assessment results with the learner in plain language. Be specific, give examples, and include strengths as well as needs. You may want to avoid talking about grade-equivalent (GE) scores because a low GE may be discouraging.
- Explain that the results will be kept confidential (not released to others except for reporting purposes) and only used to set goals and plan instruction.
- Working in collaboration with the learner, establish a learning plan based on assessment results and individual goals and including details for the first steps: specific skills to be addressed, learning activities, and assessments. Working with adults as partners gives them a measure of control and may help them to maintain the motivation to continue their studies. Another strategy for maintaining momentum is to keep learning activities connected to individual learner goals.

Making instruction relevant and useful

Adult learners, including those working on basic reading skills, have practical goals in mind. What they do in class should directly relate to those goals because if they do not see the instruction as relevant they may stop coming to class. To achieve their goals, adults must be able to transfer their reading skills to out-of-class contexts and tasks (on the job or at home), and making this transfer requires practice doing exactly that. Transfer doesn't always happen as a matter of course. You need to teach the transfer. On the other hand, you must provide the instruction learners need, and if, for instance, they need basic reading skill development, you will have to use a structured, sequential approach. Even if you do not adopt one textbook or program, you may decide to use commercial materials to introduce concepts and skills and provide early practice opportunities or reading matter with a controlled vocabulary. You will be challenged to integrate the skills instruction they need with real-world learning based on goals.

For many learners it may be fairly easy to use authentic work- or family-related materials—or pre-GED® textbooks—to practice reading and writing. For those with more serious reading deficiencies, though, finding adult materials at appropriate levels is often difficult. You may have to ask the learners to have patience as you use classroom texts or other structured material to introduce skills. Whenever possible, they should eventually practice those skills with authentic (real-life) materials. You may also tape portions of authentic materials (manuals from work, for instance) and have adults read along with the tape. This works best if the material is not too far above their reading level. Another option for weaker readers is to read the material aloud and ask them to retell it. If you take down their words you create meaningful reading material they can discuss and use for skills practice.

And of course, direct skills instruction should not be the only focus of the reading lesson. Adults should have other literacy-rich experiences as well: reading and discussing stories, poetry, and articles, or researching topics of interest.