



Evidence-Based Reading Instruction for the Advanced Adult Reader

WHAT IS READING?

In adult education, we define *reading* as the process of understanding, analyzing, and evaluating written texts in order to accomplish goals and tasks in the workplace, in the family, in the community, and for lifelong learning and enjoyment. In addition to reading for pleasure, adults read to apply the content to decision-making, to access resources and information, to connect with important people in their lives, and to inspire their own activity.

The act of reading requires the integration of a range of component knowledge and sub-skills. These include decoding written words, understanding word meanings, processing sentences and paragraphs fluently, and activating cognitive and metacognitive strategies to manage comprehension. Reading is enhanced when accompanied by the motivation to engage with text and to persevere when comprehension breaks down. It is also affected by knowledge of the language system, background knowledge related to the content, and a cultural understanding of the formats and uses of text.

Proficient adult readers can read a great variety of texts, presented either on paper or on electronic devices, for a variety of purposes. They can also read text presented in a diverse set of culturally-determined formats, such as labels, signs, posters, forms, charts, directions, magazines, newspapers, blogs, websites, self-help books, novels, commentary, and social media platforms.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this brief is to share guidance from research and professional wisdom in the area of teaching advanced adult readers. Research reviews and findings from foundational and recent reports on adult reading inform this brief. Since research with adult reading instruction is limited, relevant research related to advanced-level reading from the K-12 literature is included as well. Where research does not provide adequate guidance, the consensus of experts in the field—professional wisdom—is presented.

WHO ARE ADVANCED ADULT READERS?

According to the National Reporting System for Adult Education (NRS), advanced adult readers include native and non-native English readers who perform in reading at the Adult Basic Education (ABE) Levels 5 (Low Adult Secondary) and 6 (High Adult Secondary). Even though they can likely comprehend most texts they encounter in their daily lives, they may lack sufficient knowledge and skills to tackle the complex texts and sophisticated reading tasks required for postsecondary study and career training. Texts related to medical concerns, finances, insurance, civic issues, and the workplace may also prove challenging. In order to become proficient, skilled readers, they need evidence-based reading instruction.

WHAT IS EVIDENCE-BASED READING INSTRUCTION (EBRI)?

Evidence-based reading instruction, or EBRI, is reading instruction that is grounded in research and professional wisdom. EBRI tends to focus on the teaching of four essential components of reading. These are:

- **Alphabetics:** the set of knowledge and skills that support the ability to turn printed words into the spoken words they represent; includes **phonemic awareness** (the ability to hear and manipulate the individual sounds of the language) and **decoding** (the ability to associate individual letters and letter combinations to the sounds they represent);
- **Vocabulary:** knowledge of the meanings of words and phrases;
- **Fluency:** reading connected text with accuracy, at the appropriate rate, and with the expression (or, *prosody*) typical of speech; and
- **Comprehension:** the construction of different levels of meaning—both literal and inferential—from printed text.

Compared to beginning and intermediate adult readers, advanced readers are able to read words that are longer, more abstract, and less common; sentences that are longer and more complex; and texts that are longer, structured in more sophisticated ways, and densely packed with information and/or literary devices. The main components that instructors should address with advanced readers are vocabulary and reading comprehension. Instruction should be **explicit**, scaffolding skill development by explaining what the target skill is and why it is important, modeling, providing guided practice with feedback, and engaging learners in independent application of the skill.

TEACHING AND ASSESSING INTERMEDIATE ADULT READERS

The evidence base suggests the following content and practices for teaching the essential components to advanced adult readers.

Alphabetics and Fluency. Diagnostic assessment of advanced adult readers in the four components usually shows sufficient skills in alphabetics and fluency to support reading comprehension. However, some learners in this level may have significantly weaker alphabetics and fluency skills, perhaps due to a learning disability. In these cases, instruction in alphabetics and/or fluency can be provided using similar techniques incorporated with intermediate readers.

Vocabulary. Whereas alphabetics refers to a set of tools readers use to turn printed words into spoken words, vocabulary refers to the meanings readers attach to words. Since knowledge of word meanings is closely related to comprehension, vocabulary instruction at the advanced level is vital to support ongoing growth in reading comprehension. Although learners will vary in their reading vocabulary knowledge, most students will still need instruction in vocabulary.

EBRI in vocabulary for advanced adult readers typically includes:

- Emphasizing:
 - High-level academic, or “Tier 2,” words (words that cut across content areas and are used by sophisticated language users—e.g., *idiosyncratic, transformation, subsidiary*),
 - The meanings of domain-specific, or “Tier 3,” words (words that are specific to a content area topic currently under study—e.g., *peninsula, hypothesis*),
 - The meanings and use of signal words (e.g., *nevertheless, however*),
 - The meanings of Greek and Latin roots, prefixes, and affixes, and
 - Determining meanings of unknown words (e.g., context, morphological analysis, dictionaries);
- Teaching word meanings through:
 - Explicit instruction of each word (pronounce and define, use in context, make and invite learners to make personal connections),
 - Multiple opportunities over time for learners to use and see/hear words in a variety of contexts,
 - Generative activities for engaging learners with words (e.g., using new words to discuss current events, daily activities, topics under study, and texts), and
 - Regular formative assessment;
- Cultivating word awareness (e.g., create a word-rich environment, draw attention to how words are used);
- Incorporating writing;
- Fostering independent learning of vocabulary by encouraging learners to:
 - Use problem-solving strategies (context, morphological awareness) to discern unknown words,
 - Practice/track new vocabulary with flashcards, cell phone apps, a vocabulary notebook,
 - Use cognates,
 - Use new vocabulary in speaking and writing, and
 - Read widely outside of class.

Adults with learning disabilities may need more time to learn new words and to make associations between words heard and words read. They may also especially benefit from multiple modes of learning vocabulary. ELs who are translating from their native language need to pay attention to how meanings do or do not overlap (cognates and false cognates, multiple-meaning words); they will need to learn idiomatic uses/expressions as well.

Comprehension. Reading comprehension involves both extracting and constructing meaning from written text (Snow, 2002). It is greatly influenced by the other three essential components of reading; however, there are additional factors that affect comprehension. These include:

- **Author considerations:** the author's intended audience, writing style, and purpose
- **Reader considerations:** reader's background knowledge, purpose for reading, motivation
- **Text considerations:** the topic, ideas, organization, language features, text features, and design
- **Task considerations:** the purpose and the complexity of the task assigned, including any questions posed

EBRI in comprehension for advanced adult readers includes:

- Targeting complex tasks, such as:
 - Analyzing how ideas are organized and developed.
 - Determining main ideas, themes, and supporting details or evidence
 - Examining author choices (e.g., about character development, word choice, arguments)
 - Evaluating the trustworthiness of sources, validity of reasoning, and sufficiency of evidence
 - Synthesizing ideas across a lengthy text or multiple texts
 - Using texts to inform own ideas/arguments, citing evidence
- Teaching basic and advanced comprehension strategies, such as:
 - Prereading
 - Using text features and reading aids
 - Rereading
 - Annotating
 - Monitoring and repairing comprehension
 - Analyzing text structure
 - Using graphic organizers
 - Summarizing
 - Using multiple strategies
- Designing instruction that includes:
 - Explaining and modeling
 - Establishing a purpose for reading
 - Asking text-based questions

- Providing opportunities for guided practice
- Providing opportunities for collaboration and extended discussion around text
- Integrating fluency practice (e.g., chunking long sentences; using signal word cues)
- Facilitating adult learner autonomy
- Integrating reading and writing

Adults with learning disabilities may need very structured explicit instruction and repeated practice in selecting, applying, and integrating comprehension strategies. ELs will likely need to further develop their cultural understandings of how English texts are used and organized as well as their knowledge of English grammar.

ADDITIONAL CONSIDERATIONS

Recent research in teaching literacy to adults has emphasized the role that motivation plays in learning to read. While teaching the essential components of reading, practitioners should attend to issues that affect persistence and readiness to learn by:

- Setting expectations for respectful ways of interacting with and responding to each other;
- Respecting and showing compassion for each learner's history and linguistic/cognitive context;
- Involving learners in setting goals, selecting texts, and designing tasks; and
- Fostering a growth mindset among learners by:
 - Recognizing effort instead of innate intelligence, and
 - Celebrating successes.

Practitioners can also benefit from referring to state content standards for adult education, such as the *College and Career Readiness Standards for Adult Education* (Pimentel, 2013). These are especially helpful in informing what kind of scope and sequence teachers/programs should use to guide instruction in each essential component.

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