



Evidence-Based Reading Instruction for the Beginning 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. Adults may 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.

Beginning adult readers, however, range from not being able to read anything at all to being able to read only enough to accomplish very basic tasks. Using the National Reporting System (NRS), these readers fall within the Adult Basic Education (ABE) Levels 1 and 2 and within Levels 1–4 of the English as a Second Language (ESL) levels.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this brief is to share guidance from research and professional wisdom about teaching beginning adult readers. Research from classic and more recent reports on adults' reading (e.g., NRC, 2012; Kruidenier, et al., 2010) inform this brief. Since research with adult reading instruction is limited, relevant research in beginning 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.

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:

- **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.

Diagnostic assessment in these components informs instruction for beginning adult readers, helping to identify where instruction should start and how much progress is being made over time. Instruction itself is systematic and explicit. **Systematic** means there is a scope and sequence that is guiding instruction. **Explicit** refers to instruction that scaffolds skill development through some variation of a four-step process that includes: explanation of the target skill, modeling, guided practice, and independent application.

TEACHING AND ASSESSING BEGINNING ADULT READERS

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

Alphabetics. Research on EBRI for adult learners has found that adults who are in the beginning stages of learning to read often lack **phonemic awareness** and/or skills in decoding. Phonemic awareness refers to the ability to hear the individual sounds of language, and **decoding** refers to the ability to match letters and letter combinations to their corresponding sounds. Compared to children who are learning to read, beginning adult readers who are native English speakers depend more on sight words and background knowledge to read unfamiliar words rather than on translating letters to sounds. Research shows that explicit teaching of phonemic awareness and decoding helps improve reading at this level.

EBRI in alphabetics for beginning adult readers includes:

- Explicit and systematic instruction targeting areas determined by diagnostic assessment, such as:
 - Phonemic awareness (or phonological awareness if skills are especially low),
 - Letter-sound correspondences, high-frequency spelling patterns, or onset-rime combinations (shown in “word families”), and common inflectional suffixes (*-s*, *-ing-*, *-ed*),
 - Strategies for decoding unfamiliar 1- and 2-syllable words (e.g., finding known letters/spelling patterns and blending the sounds), and
 - Common sight words;
- Abundant and varied opportunities to apply alphabetics skills when reading connected text (e.g. decodable texts, leveled meaning-based texts, and self-written/dictated texts); and
- Ongoing formative feedback on student progress and identification of areas of focus for further learning; and

- Fostering independent learning of alphabets by encouraging learners to:
 - Use flashcards or cell phone apps to practice recognizing letters or patterns,
 - Engage in repeated readings of texts (e.g., personal letters, labels, self-written/dictated texts, stories introduced in class), and
 - Select hands-on materials to practice with and texts to read.

Adults with low reading skills may have learning disabilities, which may or may not have been diagnosed earlier. These adults may need additional practice with oral skills (phonological and phonemic awareness) to build the base for learning print skills; they may further need repetition (in varied ways) with specific phonics concepts and regular reinforcement once skills are initially learned. Most beginning level English learners (ELs) will also require instruction in phonemic awareness and decoding and may need targeted attention on the pronunciation/sounds of English. ELs who can read in another alphabetic language may need support in transferring relevant alphabets skills to reading English.

Vocabulary. Whereas *alphabets* refers to a set of tools readers use to turn printed words into spoken words, *vocabulary* refers to the meaning readers attach to words. Most native English speakers who are very beginning readers have more words in their oral vocabulary (words understood when speaking and listening) than their reading vocabulary (words they can understand when reading). That means when they first start learning to read, their relatively stronger oral vocabulary will let them know when they have decoded a written word properly, and then they can attach meaning to it. Soon, though, they may start to encounter words that are not in their oral vocabularies either, and vocabulary instruction will become a priority. ELs who are learning to read English may not yet have strong oral vocabulary skills in English. Building vocabulary will be especially important for them.

EBRI instruction in vocabulary for beginning adult readers includes:

- Focusing on:
 - The meanings of high-frequency “Tier 2 words” (words that can be used in a variety of contexts– e.g., *describe, main*), as determined by diagnostic assessment (ELs may also need instruction in everyday words, often called “Tier 1 words”),
 - Recognizing and attaching meaning to high-frequency suffixes (e.g., *-ed, -ing*), and
 - Distinguishing between similar words (e.g., *buy/by; plain/plane; road/rode*);
- Teaching word meanings through:
 - Explicit introduction of each word (e.g., pronounce and define, use in context, make and invite students to make personal connections),
 - Multiple opportunities over time for students to use and see/hear words in a variety of contexts,

- Generative activities for engaging with words (e.g., using new words to discuss current events, daily activities, topics under study, and texts), and
 - Regular formative assessment;
- Teaching metacognitive strategies for determining word meanings (e.g., look for individual words in compound words; use sentence context; use simple print and digital glossaries or dictionaries); and
- Fostering independent learning of vocabulary by encouraging learners to:
 - Read widely inside and outside of class,
 - Keep a vocabulary notebook,
 - Practice with flashcards or vocabulary apps on a mobile device, and/or
 - Use new vocabulary in speaking and writing.

Many adults with low reading skills, including those with learning disabilities, may need a considerable amount of time to learn new words. They may also benefit from multiple modes of learning vocabulary (e.g., associating pictures or movements with words/phrases). ELs may need additional support, as they may be translating from their native language. They need to attend to how meanings do or do not overlap (e.g, cognates vs. false cognates, multiple-meaning words). ELs will also need to learn idiomatic uses/expressions.

Fluency. Fluency in reading refers to reading connected text with accuracy, at an appropriate rate, and with appropriate expression/prosody. Assessment of oral reading provides insights into the internal processes at work. The smooth, expressive reading of connected text requires 1) automatic recognition of words and their associated meanings, 2) attention to punctuation and phrasing as cues for meaning, and 3) an understanding of how meaning is conveyed through the rising and falling of the voice and the emphasis on individual words. Oral reading fluency is typically assessed in beginning adult readers by counting the number of words they read correctly per minute or by evaluating individual aspects of fluency (e.g., word accuracy, rate, and expression).

EBRI instruction in fluency for beginning adult readers includes:

- Assessing oral reading fluency to determine specific fluency learning goals;
- Being explicit about what fluency, in general, is as well as what realistic expectations are at this level (accurate reading; attention to end punctuation and commas; simple phrasing as cued through verb phrases and prepositional phrases; reading with expression);
- Using guided, repeated oral reading techniques (timed readings, echo reading, choral reading, and partner reading); and
- Building adult learner autonomy in developing fluency (e.g., preparing ahead of time for oral reading events, timing their own readings, reading extensively).

Adults with learning disabilities may need more extensive practice with fluency, especially to develop word accuracy and speed. ELs will need extensive practice with the structure of English sentences to know how to read strings of words in ways that reflect and express meaning.

Comprehension. Reading comprehension involves both extracting and constructing meaning from written text (Snow, 2002). It is greatly influenced by the other essential components of reading; however, there are also comprehension-specific factors that enable readers to read with and for greater understanding. The majority of instructional time in teaching beginning adult readers is devoted to alphabets, fluency, and vocabulary. However, many ELs (who are unfamiliar with how English texts are organized and used) and even native English speakers will benefit long term if instruction at the beginning level also addresses basic comprehension skills and strategies.

EBRI instruction in comprehension for beginning adult readers includes:

- Focusing on basic comprehension skills and strategies, including:
 - Making predictions from titles and illustrations; checking predictions and making new ones throughout the reading,
 - Identifying pronoun antecedents and drawing inferences,
 - Answering *who, what, where, when, why, how* questions about the text,
 - Identifying story elements (e.g., main character, setting, plot) in simple narratives, and
 - Attending to uses and features of certain authentic text types (e.g., forms, bills, labels);
- Use the **gradual release of responsibility** model for instruction (e.g., explaining why the skill/strategy is important; modeling through teacher think-alouds; guided practice with feedback; independent application);
- Building background knowledge (e.g., through reading multiple texts around the same topic, video/podcast supplements; discussion);
- Engage learners in rich discussion about text (e.g., through asking open-ended questions, requiring text-based responses); and
- Fostering independent learning (e.g., teaching metacognitive strategies, encouraging extensive reading).

Adults with learning disabilities may need very structured, explicit instruction and repeated practice in selecting and applying comprehension strategies. Again, ELs may need extra support, as they may need to develop a cultural understanding of how English texts are used and formatted as well as how English grammar works.

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 their 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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