



# Evidence-Based Reading Instruction for the Intermediate 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.

**Intermediate adult readers**, however, are not yet able to access the full range of texts available in society. Using the National Reporting System (NRS), these readers fall within the Adult Basic Education (ABE) Levels 3 and 4 and within the English as a Second Language (ESL) Levels 5 and 6.

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this brief is to share guidance from research and professional wisdom in the area of teaching intermediate adult readers. Research reviews and findings from classic and more recent reports on adult reading inform this brief. Since research with adult reading instruction is limited, relevant research related to intermediate-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.

## 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.

Because adults reading at the intermediate level can vary widely in their strengths and instructional needs, diagnostic assessment is especially important for this group. Instruction should also 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 intermediate adult readers.

**Alphabetics.** Research on EBRI for adult learners suggests that even adults reading at the intermediate levels can have significant issues with alphabetics. Diagnostic assessment is required to see if poor alphabetics skills are affecting reading comprehension. Readers at the low-intermediate level may especially need targeted alphabetics instruction since research has found that they may not apply their existing alphabetics knowledge when attempting to identify unknown words; instead, they may over-rely on context and guessing.

EBRI in alphabetics for intermediate adult readers includes:

- Explicit instruction targeting areas determined by diagnostic assessment, including:
  - Recognizing words of three or more syllables,
  - Recognizing common syllable types,
  - Recognizing and pronouncing common prefixes, suffixes, and roots, and
  - Strategies for decoding unfamiliar words of three or more syllables (e.g., identifying common syllable types, putting the stress on appropriate syllables);
- Abundant and varied opportunities to apply alphabetics skills when reading connected text (e.g., leveled and authentic texts);
- Ongoing formative feedback on student progress and identification of areas for further learning; and
- Fostering independent learning of alphabetics (e.g., by using flashcards, cell phone apps, or word sorts from class to practice recognizing syllable patterns or applying syllabication rules; by reading extensively).

Some learners at this level, including those with learning disabilities, may need instruction in decoding one- and two-syllable words before moving to longer words. Many English learners (ELs) reading at the intermediate level will also need support in the pronunciation/sounds of English. Furthermore, those ELs who can read in an alphabetic language may need guidance in transferring relevant alphabetic skills to reading English.

**Vocabulary.** Whereas *alphabetics* refers to a set of tools readers use to turn printed words into spoken words, *vocabulary* refers to the meaning readers attach to words. As readers reach the low-intermediate level, they start to regularly encounter words in print that are not found in their everyday, oral vocabulary. This means that saying the words correctly will not necessarily trigger a connection to a known word for which the reader already has attached meaning. Since knowledge of word meanings is closely related to comprehension, vocabulary instruction at the intermediate level is vital to support growth in reading comprehension..

EBRI in vocabulary for intermediate adult readers includes:

- Emphasizing:
  - The appropriate level of “Tier 2 words” (or words that cut across content areas and are used by sophisticated language users—e.g., *develop, beneficial*), to be determined by diagnostic assessment and
  - Recognizing and attaching meaning to common prefixes, suffixes, and roots.
- Incorporating:
  - The meanings of “Tier 3 words” (or words that are specific to a content area topic currently under study—e.g., *peninsula, hypothesis*) and
  - Understanding the meanings of signal words (e.g., *therefore, however*);
- Teaching word meanings through:
  - Explicit instruction of each word (pronounce and define, use in context, make and invite learners to make personal connections),
  - Recognizing and attaching meaning to common prefixes, suffixes, and roots,
  - 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;
- Teaching metacognitive strategies for determining word meanings (e.g., look for prefixes, suffixes, and/or roots and apply associated meanings; use sentence, paragraph, and text-level context; use print and digital glossaries, dictionaries, or thesauruses);
- Cultivating word awareness (e.g., word hunts, analyzing authors’ word choices); and

- Fostering independent learning of vocabulary (e.g., by applying metacognitive strategies, reviewing new vocabulary, incorporating new vocabulary into speaking and writing).

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). ELs will need to learn idiomatic uses/expressions as well.

**Fluency.** Fluent readers are able to read the words and sentences of text with considerable ease, but such ease belies the complexities involved. 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. Intermediate adult readers are still trying to integrate these internal processes and often lack fluency, even when reading text at their silent comprehension level. Since these processes do occur internally, instructors rely on learners' oral reading for assessment and instruction. The fluency of intermediate adult readers is typically assessed by using a rubric to evaluate the various aspects of fluency exhibited during oral reading.

EBRI in fluency for intermediate adult readers includes:

- Assessing oral reading fluency to determine specific fluency learning goal
- Being explicit about what fluency is, in general, as well as what realistic expectations are at this level (accurate word reading; attention to all punctuation cues; appropriate phrasing; reading with expression);
- Using repeated reading techniques (e.g., guided, repeated oral reading, timed readings, echo reading, choral reading) and providing feedback;
- Fostering independent development of fluency e.g., by preparing ahead of time for oral reading events, timing own readings, reading extensively).

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

EBRI in comprehension for intermediate adult readers includes:

- Use the **gradual release of responsibility** model for instruction (e.g., articulating a purpose for reading, using text features and linguistic features of the text structure/type to help understand connections and ideas, and annotating the text with thoughts and questions);
- Targeting appropriate comprehension skills, such as:
  - Identifying author’s audience, purpose, and point of view,
  - Determining explicit meanings of text, making logical inferences, and citing evidence for conclusions drawn,
  - Analyzing how the ideas are organized and developed,
  - Determining main ideas, themes, and supporting details or evidence, and
  - Evaluating the trustworthiness of sources, validity of reasoning, and sufficiency of evidence;
- Teaching comprehension strategies, such as:
  - Articulating a purpose for reading,
  - Making and checking predictions,
  - Annotating the text with thoughts and questions,
  - Using text features and linguistic features of the text structure/type to help understand connections and ideas,
  - Using graphic organizers to connect ideas in the text (e.g., Venn diagrams);
  - Paraphrasing or summarizing—either orally or in writing—to monitor comprehension,
  - Self-questioning and answering,
  - Applying fix-up strategies when comprehension breaks down, and
  - Using graphic organizers to connect ideas in the text (e.g., Venn diagrams);
- Engage learners in rich discussion about text (e.g., through asking open-ended questions, requiring text-based responses);
- Building background knowledge (e.g., through reading multiple texts around the same topic, video/podcast supplements; discussion); and
- Fostering independent development of reading comprehension (e.g, by applying metacognitive strategies; reading widely).

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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