





Improving Adult Literacy Instruction: Developing Reading and Writing

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Alan M. Lesgold and Melissa Welch-Ross, Editors; Committee on Learning Sciences: Foundations and Applications to Adolescent and Adult Literacy; National Research Council

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Effective Reading Instruction



astery of reading requires developing its highly interrelated major component skills: decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. These components are discussed separately below, but they work together in the process of reading. Effective reading instruction explicitly and systematically targets each component skill that needs to be developed and supports the integration of all of them. Although skill needs to be attained in all components, the amount of emphasis given to each during instruction will vary depending on each learner's needs.

Decoding. Explicit and systematic phonics instruction to teach correspondences between letters and phonemes (sounds)—known as decoding—facilitates reading development for children of different ages, abilities, and socioeconomic circumstances. Although little is known about how best to provide decoding instruction to adolescents and adults who struggle with reading so that they make substantial progress, the dependence of literacy on decoding skill is clear. Even highly skilled adult readers must rely on alphabetic knowledge and decoding skills to read unfamiliar words.

Instructors need to be prepared to explicitly and systematically teach all aspects of the English word-reading system: letter-sound patterns, high-frequency spelling patterns (oat, at, end, ar), consonant blends (st, bl, cr), vowel combinations (ai, oa, ea), prefixes and suffixes (pre-, sub-, -ing), and irregular high-frequency words (sight words that do not follow regular spelling patterns).

The degree to which instruction needs to focus on decoding and which particular aspects of decoding to emphasize depends on how developed the various decoding skills are for each learner. Adults who are literate in a first language and who are learning English as a second language, for example, may need less instruction and practice in decoding to learn letter-sound mappings than those who have not yet mastered decoding in a first language.

Vocabulary. Vocabulary knowledge—specifically, the depth, breadth, and flexibility of a person’s knowledge about words—is a primary predictor of reading success. Vocabulary development can be aided if instructors select words and teach their meanings before asking learners to read text containing these words.

Effective instruction focuses on teaching the multiple meanings of words and varied word forms; it also provides ample opportunities to encounter and use words in varied contexts. Vocabulary knowledge is not a simple dichotomy of knowing or not knowing a word’s meaning. Rather, learners’ knowledge develops on a continuum that ranges from not

knowing a word at all, to recognizing it, to knowing its uses in different contexts—a pattern of gradual growth that is seldom reflected in vocabulary tests. Because vocabulary tends to grow with reading experience, adults need practice reading a wide range of content, including texts related to their education, work, or other specific learning goals.

Learners often need to concentrate on developing vocabulary for succeeding in academic subjects or understanding other specialized material. Because this specialized vocabulary is not part of everyday spoken language, it is important to integrate the explicit teaching of words and phrases with opportunities to use new words in classroom discussion or writing assignments to improve both vocabulary and reading comprehension. Drawing on learners’ existing knowledge can help; teachers of adoles-

cents have used language and concepts drawn from students’ lives as a bridge to support deeper understanding of academic language.

Fluency. Reading fluency is the ability to read with speed and accuracy. Developing fluency is important because the human mind is limited in its capacity to carry out many cognitive processes at once. When word and sentence reading are automatic and fluent, readers can concentrate more fully on understanding and connecting sentences and paragraphs, which enables them to create meaning from the text. For all readers, even proficient ones, fluency is affected by the complexity of the text and the reader’s familiarity with its structure. Experiments with young children show that fluency instruction can lead to significant gains in both fluency and comprehension. However, the relationship between fluency and comprehension is more complex than previously





understood, with each skill appearing to affect the other.

Another valuable tool is guided repeated reading, in which the learner receives feedback and is supported in identifying and correcting mistakes. For both good and poor readers, guided repeated reading has generally led to moderate increases in fluency and accuracy and sometimes also to increases in comprehension. The next generation of studies needs to look at the question of whether certain types of text are more effective than others for this type of intervention.

Comprehension. An approach known as comprehension strategy instruction is one of the most effective ways to develop reading comprehension, according to the National Reading Panel and other researchers. This intervention teaches learners a range of strategies, such as mentally summarizing the main ideas of a text after reading it and rereading specific parts of a text that were difficult for the reader.

Because different genres of text and different challenges to comprehension require the use of different strategies, instructors should help learners understand when and why to select particular ones, how to monitor their success, and how to adjust them as needed to achieve a reading goal. Strategy instruction seems to be most effective if it includes training in these metacognitive processes—awareness of one’s own learning—to identify difficulties in comprehension, why they may occur, and ways to resolve them. Ample opportunity to practice the strategies and apply new metacognitive skills also aids in comprehension.

Explicit training, modeling, and guided practice in the use of strategies are important for all learners, but especially for those who have serious limitations in metacognition and difficulties in managing their own use of strategies. As with the development of other literacy skills, learners are best able to develop these strategies within the context of specific content areas and as part of developing real-world literacy skills.

Instruction in comprehension strategies is the intervention with the largest base of research support, but other interventions also show promise for improving comprehension. Those interventions include elaborated discussion of text, in which learners answer open-ended questions about what they have read; critical analyses of text, in

which readers consider the author's purposes in writing the text, as well as its social and historical context; and critical thinking, reasoning, and argumentation about the text.

Because comprehension depends heavily on opportunities to draw from existing knowledge, instruction should also support the development of background, topic, and world knowledge. This knowledge is relevant to advancing both spoken and written language, which need to be developed together. Learners also need knowledge of the structure of the English language and of different modes and types of discourse, as reflected in the principles of reading instruction that follow.

Development of all of these component skills involves both explicit teaching and implicit learning, which often happens during informal learning, and requires extensive practice using new skills. As noted earlier, for reading skills to be learned and become transferable, learners need extended experience reading for varied purposes.



Principles of Effective Reading Instruction

The following principles have been shown to be effective for developing readers.

Use explicit and systematic reading instruction to develop the major components of reading—decoding, fluency, vocabulary, comprehension—according to the assessed needs of individual learners. Although each dimension is necessary for proficient reading, adolescents and adults vary in the reading instruction they need. For example, some learners will require comprehensive instruction in decoding, while others may need less or none. Instruction that helps learners develop component skills in the context of performing practical literacy tasks also increases the likelihood that literacy skills will be used outside the classroom.

Combine explicit and systematic instruction with extended reading practice to help learners acquire and transfer component reading skills. Learning to read involves both explicit teaching and implicit learning. It is vitally important that learners have extensive practice using their new skills, including both formal practice (structured assignments to develop decoding or comprehension) and informal practice (engaging with reading materials outside the classroom that are personally interesting).

Motivate learning through learners' engagement with the literacy tasks used for instruction and extensive reading practice. Learners are more engaged when literacy instruction and practice opportunities are embedded in meaningful learning activities that are useful to and valued by the learner.

Develop reading fluency to facilitate efficient reading of words and longer text. Some methods of fluency improvement—for example, guided repeated reading—have been effective with children and are likely to be effective with adolescents and adults.

Explicitly teach the structure of written language to facilitate decoding and comprehension. Develop learners' awareness of the features of written language at multiple levels (word, sentence, passage). Teach regularity and irregularity of spelling-to-sound mappings, the patterns of English morphology (the units of meaning in the English language, which can be words or parts of words, such as prefixes and suffixes), the rules of grammar and syntax, and the structures of various text genres.

To develop vocabulary, use a mixture of instructional approaches combined with extensive reading of texts to create an enriched verbal environment. Learners develop nuanced understanding of words by encountering them multiple times in a variety of texts and discussions. Promising approaches for adolescents and adults are instruction that integrates the teaching of vocabulary with instruction in reading comprehension, the development of topic and background knowledge, and learning of disciplinary or other valued content.

Strategies to develop comprehension include teaching varied goals and purposes for reading; encouraging learners to state their own reading goals, predictions, questions, and reactions to material; encouraging extensive reading practice with varied forms of text; teaching and modeling the use of multiple comprehension strategies; and teaching self-regulation in the monitoring of strategy use.

Developing readers often need help to develop the metacognitive components of reading comprehension, such as learning how to identify reading goals; select, implement, and coordinate multiple strategies; monitor and evaluate success of the strategies, and adjust them to achieve reading goals. Developing readers also need extensive practice with various texts to develop knowledge of words, text structures, and written syntax that are not identical to spoken language.