

How Should Adult ESL Reading Instruction Differ From ABE Reading Instruction?

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Adult Learners

Adult education programs serve both learners who are native English speakers and those whose first, or native, language is not English. Native English speakers attend adult basic education (ABE) classes to learn basic skills so they can get high school equivalency certificates or to achieve other goals related to job, family, or further education. English language learners attend English as a second language (ESL) or ABE classes to improve their oral and written skills in English and to achieve goals similar to those of native English speakers. Sometimes ABE classes include both native English speakers and English language learners.

Audience for This Brief

This brief is written for the following audiences:

- Practitioners—teachers, teacher trainers, curriculum writers, and program administrators—who work with adult English language learners in ESL classes or in mixed ABE classes (with native English speakers and English language learners)
- Educational researchers

Background

Literacy and language proficiency in English seem to be related to economic self-sufficiency. Immigrants who are literate only in a language other than English are more likely to have non-continuous employment and to earn less than those literate in English (Greenberg, Macías, Rhodes, & Chan, 2001). An analysis of the 2000 U.S. Census data on immigrant earnings revealed a positive relationship between earnings and English language and literacy (Chiswick & Miller, 2002).

Increasing the English reading skills of adult immigrants is an important task. Unfortunately, little research exists on how adult immigrants learn to read in English and which instructional practices are the most successful. In order to provide evidence-based suggestions for teaching reading to adult English language learners, this brief summarizes the research base on adult English speakers learning to

read and the suggestions for instruction from these studies (Kruidenier, 2002). Then, using findings from a synthesis of research on adult English language learners learning to read (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003), the brief describes how these learners differ from native English speakers and how these differences should affect instruction.

Research Base

A review of research on adult literacy and reading instruction in ABE was conducted by a group convened by the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) and the National Center for the Study of Adult Learning and Literacy (NCSALL). This Reading Research Working Group looked at approximately 70 research studies (Kruidenier, 2002). Only 5 of the studies addressed English language learners specifically; the rest of the studies were normed on native English speakers.

Another review focused on reading development among adult English language learners in the United States (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003). The review found only 47 studies that addressed this group of learners. Of those, only 24 were conducted in non-postsecondary education settings (adult education programs, community-based programs, and workplace literacy programs). The others were conducted in college-based intensive English programs (IEPs). Although the body of research is small and preliminary, it provides valuable information about English language learners in adult education programs and can be used as the springboard for future research studies.

Research Findings

Kruidenier (2002) discusses the following components of reading:

- Vocabulary
- Alphabetics and word analysis
- Fluency
- Comprehension

These components are defined below with corresponding suggestions from Kruidenier for teaching reading to adult learners in ABE programs. Note that the suggestions marked with an asterisk (*) may not be effective with adults learning English. The suggestions are followed by a brief discussion of the marked items and the ways that these might be handled with English language learners. This discussion is informed by the review by Burt, Peyton, and Adams (2003) and writings on second language acquisition by Birch (2002), Eskey (2005), Folse (2004), Hadley (1993), Nation (2000, 2005), and Qian (1999). This literature suggests that the differences between adult English speakers and those learning English may affect both the ways that adults learn and how they should be taught to read.

VOCABULARY

Vocabulary refers to the words that a person knows. Reading vocabulary is critical to the comprehension processes of a skilled reader. Kruidenier (2002) makes the following suggestions for teaching ABE learners:

- Conduct oral assessments, where learners either choose the one correct meaning of a word from multiple choices or define terms in their own words.
- Teach vocabulary in semantic sets.*
- Encourage students to get meaning of new vocabulary items through context.*

Issues for adult English language learners

Folse (2004) reviewed the research on teaching vocabulary in semantic sets (e.g., colors, foods, furniture, days of the week) and found that grouping words in this way can actually impede the learning of vocabulary. This is because if similar new words are presented together, such as a set of colors or the days of the week, the learner is likely to confuse the words. The same is true if antonym pairs such as *hot/cold*, *fat/thin*, *right/left* are presented together. Folse suggests grouping new vocabulary around looser themes, such as going out to eat, planning a trip, or celebrating an anniversary. Nation (2000, 2005) recommends teaching high-frequency vocabulary first. For example, rather than presenting *red*, *yellow*, *blue*, *black*, *white*, etc. at one time, he suggests beginning with one color. In this way, *red*, which is used more frequently than *orange*, would be taught before *orange*. *Tuesday*, which is used more frequently than *Thursday*, would be taught before *Thursday* (Nation, 2000). This separation of *Tuesday* and *Thursday* would also avoid confusion between these two words, which are similar phonologically and in spelling (Folse, 2004).

Acquiring the meaning of a vocabulary item through context clues—a strategy often taught by ABE teachers—is difficult for learners of English as a second language,

because they often do not have the vocabulary in English that native speakers have (Eskey, 2005). For example, while fluent English speakers possess a written English vocabulary of 10,000–100,000 words, second language learners generally know only 2,000–7,000 English words when they begin their academic studies (Hadley, 1993). This gap can impede success in listening to lectures, reading academic material, or writing essays. Using context to understand new vocabulary requires an understanding of more than 98% of the words of a passage (Nation, 2005). Furthermore, even if the meaning of a word can be guessed from context, knowledge of the word may be superficial. Truly knowing a word includes knowing its pronunciation, spelling, morphological and syntactic properties (e.g., part of speech, prefixes, and suffixes), and multiple meanings; the contexts in which the word can be used; the frequency with which it is used; and its collocates, or how it combines with other words (e.g., the word *squander* is often paired with resources, time, or money; Folse, 2004). For these reasons, vocabulary teaching needs to be planned and deliberate with English language learners.

Suggestions for teaching English language learners

Because English language learners need to acquire more English vocabulary for all aspects of their lives, Birch (2002), Eskey (2005), Folse (2004), and Nation (2000, 2005) suggest the following:

- Pre-teach the vocabulary in a reading passage.
- To limit the number of vocabulary items that must be pre-taught, select reading passages that are only slightly above what learners can read independently.
- Teach high-frequency words first.
- Provide learners with multiple exposures to specific words in multiple contexts.
- Provide learners with lists of words for intentional learning.
- Avoid presenting synonyms, antonyms, or words in the same semantic set together.
- Teach learners to use both monolingual and bilingual dictionaries. Because even English dictionaries designed specifically for learners contain about 2,000 words with definitions and examples in English, learners at basic reading levels may not understand the definitions and explanations. They will need to use bilingual dictionaries.
- Encourage learners to use word cards (note cards with the English word on one side and the translation on the back) and to study them frequently.
- Encourage vocabulary learning through regular tests where students can prove receptive knowledge of words

through matching words to definitions or multiple-choice exercises.

- After reading, students can write sentences in which they use specific words and grammatical forms.

ALPHABETICS AND WORD ANALYSIS

Kruidenier (2002) defines *alphabets* as the “whole process of using the letters in a written alphabet to represent meaningful spoken words” (p. 35). Adult beginning readers typically have difficulty applying letter-sound knowledge to figure out new words while reading. *Word analysis* refers to the methods that readers use to recognize words. These methods include understanding letter-sound correspondences and recognizing sight words; using context to determine meaning; knowing prefixes, suffixes, and root words; and using dictionaries. Kruidenier makes the following suggestions for teaching ABE learners:

- Assess beginning readers’ letter-sound knowledge through their pronunciation of letters, word parts, or whole words that are decodable using common rules or generalizations.
- Assess knowledge of sight words with lists of regularly and irregularly spelled words.
- Provide adult beginning readers with explicit instruction in word analysis.
- When assessing letter-sound knowledge, consider using nonsense words to ensure the reader does not know the words as sight words.*

Issues for adult English language learners

English language learners may have no literacy skills in any language, or they may be literate in a nonalphabetic system such as Chinese, a non-Roman alphabet such as Cyrillic, or a Roman alphabet such as Spanish. All will experience some difficulty with English sound-symbol relationships (Burt, Peyton, & Adams, 2003). Alphabets instruction for native English speakers generally assumes high oral language skills and vocabulary. Nonnative English speakers do not have the vocabulary base in English that native speakers have in either written or oral expression. As a result, instructional strategies that rely on oral comprehension of vocabulary and use of nonsense words to teach sound-symbol correspondence are unlikely to be successful with English language learners (Nation, 2005; Qian, 1999).

Suggestions for teaching English language learners

- Teach English letter-sound correspondences to all learners.
- When assessing knowledge of letter-sound relationships, use actual English words that follow patterns, such as *bat/pat/sat*. Do not use nonsense words.
- Teach morphophonemic relationships in the English writing system. For example, point out that while the regular past tense has different pronunciations depend-

ing on the phonological structure of the verb, past tense morphology for regular English verbs has only one written form: *-ed* (e.g., *laughed* /t/, *climbed* /d/, *wanted* /əd/).

- Teach word-analysis skills, including word prefixes and suffixes.
- Identify parts of speech and their roles.

FLUENCY

Fluency is the ability to read easily and accurately, with appropriate rhythm, intonation, and expression. For ABE learners, fluency instruction and practice may lead to increased reading ability. Kruidenier (2002) makes the following suggestions for teaching ABE learners:

- Assess learners’ fluency by rating the accuracy and speed of their oral reading.*
- Involve learners in repeated reading of texts and words, taped and live.*

Issues for adult English language learners

Extensive individual oral reading and choral reading is of questionable value in the adult ESL classroom. Accuracy in oral reading by adults learning English may be complicated by native language interference at every level from the letter-sound relationship to suprasegmentals of the language (stress, intonation, and pauses).

Suggestions for teaching English language learners

- Consider limited use of choral readings. When they are used, select short segments that emphasize English stress and intonation.
- When involving learners in oral and choral reading of texts, be certain that they first hear a native-speaker-like model of the reading.

COMPREHENSION

Reading comprehension is the ability to discern meaning from the written text. Skilled readers are purposeful and active and apply comprehension strategies to the text. Kruidenier (2002) makes the following suggestions for teaching ABE learners:

- Have students complete cloze passages (in which learners fill in specific words that are left out of a text).
- Provide instruction in comprehension strategies, such as using headings and graphics to predict meaning, summarizing verbally, skimming, and scanning.
- Assess students’ use of strategy by asking them which comprehension strategies they used.
- Assess learners’ reading comprehension by having them read passages and answer comprehension questions about the text in multiple-choice or short answers.*
- Have students summarize readings.*

Issues for adult English language learners

Cultural issues might impede text comprehension. What seems to be a straightforward text—for example, an article about a tree house or one about a family going to the Dairy Queen in a station wagon—may present the reader with difficulties in comprehension because of cultural differences. It is of limited value to assess reading comprehension when readers lack the cultural knowledge needed to understand the text. Summarizing is difficult and should not be asked of learners until they understand the text (Hood, Solomon, & Burns, 1996).

Suggestions for teaching English language learners

- Find out what students know, need to know, and want to know and then build on ideas and concepts from learners' cultures and experiences whenever possible. Select readings on topics they may be most familiar with.
- Pre-teach vocabulary and preview unfamiliar ideas, actions, vocabulary, and settings as well as titles, pictures, graphics, text structure, and discourse markers (e.g., words such as *first* or *next*).
- Use visual aids and physical objects to help learners build background knowledge.
- Assess learner comprehension through short answers, cloze exercises, and summary writing only after pre-teaching vocabulary, previewing cultural contexts, and discussing the text.

Conclusion

Some of the suggestions presented here for working with adult English speakers may also be used with adult English language learners, such as teaching letter-sound correspondence and word-analysis skills and providing instruction in comprehension strategies. However, other suggestions, such as using nonsense words in instruction or relying on context clues to build vocabulary knowledge, are not useful with nonnative English speakers. Difficulties arise because of cultural differences, gaps in English oral vocabulary between English speakers and English language learners, and interference from the native language. Practitioners need to consider these differences when planning and delivering instruction for adult English language learners. Researchers might consider further investigation of issues raised in this brief.

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