

REVIEW OF

Research on Teaching Reading

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LEARNING, LITERACY AND ESSENTIAL SKILLS PROGRAM



The following reference document provides a brief review of academic research and relevant reports on best practices for teaching and assessing reading skills. The purpose of this research was to support the development of the Skills for Success Practitioner Competency Framework and was part of a series of research reviews on best practices for teaching each of the Skills for Success. This summary provides an overview of evidence-based teaching methods in the area of reading, key considerations when applying these practices, and a list of resources for further consideration.

METHODOLOGY

To conduct this review, several search queries were conducted on Google and Google Scholar using combinations of the following keywords: reading, adult, best practices, teaching, teaching approaches, instruction, pedagogies.

STATE OF THE LITERATURE

There is extensive literature on best practices for teaching reading. As such, this review focused primarily on the publications of the two American institutions responsible for seminal works on the subject of adult literacy reading instruction: The National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) and the National Research Council (NRC).

In 2002, the NIFL produced its seminal publication which, at the time, was considered to be one of the best resources available on how adults learn to read. Building on this publication, the NIFL has since produced three subsequent reports (see below).

- Kruidenier. (2002). Research-based Principals for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction. Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy. lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/adult_ed_02.pdf.
- Curtis & Kruidenier. (2005). Teaching Adults to Read: A Summary of Scientifically Based Principles. Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/teach_adults.pdf.

- McShane. (2005). Applying Research in Reading Instruction for Adults: First Steps for Teachers. Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy. lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/applyingresearch.pdf.
- Kruidenier, MacArthur, & Wrigley. (2010). Adult Education Literacy Instruction: A Review of the Research. Washington, DC: National Institute for Literacy. files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED521229.pdf.

In 2012, the NRC produced its seminal report along with two accompanying booklets synthesizing research on literacy and learning in order to improve instruction for adult education learners (see below).

- National Research Council. (2012a). Improving Adult Literacy Instruction: Options for Practice and Research. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. doi.org/10.17226/13242.
- National Research Council. (2012b). Improving Adult Literacy Instruction: Supporting Learning and Motivation. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. doi.org/10.17226/13469.
- National Research Council. (2012c). Improving Adult Literacy Instruction: Developing Reading and Writing. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. doi.org/10.17226/13468.

CONCEPTS

The definition and integral constructs of reading as specified in the Skills for Success Framework are described below (SRDC, 2021):

DEFINITION:

“Your ability to find, understand, and use information presented through words, symbols, and images.”

CONSTRUCTS:

1. Identify the task that requires you to read
2. Identify the information contained in the document(s)
3. Make connections between different parts of the document(s)
4. Understand and apply the information
5. Evaluate the document(s)
6. Reflect on the document(s)

APPROACHES TO TEACHING READING SKILLS

Instruction of the four components of reading

There are four well established components of reading: (i) Alphabeticity (including phonemic awareness and word analysis), (ii) Fluency, (iii) Vocabulary, and (iv) Comprehension. Research shows that adults can make progress in each component of reading and ultimately improve their reading comprehension. The findings show how specific instructional techniques and approaches can be used for each component. The table that follows provides a very brief overview of this approach (Kruidenier et al 2010 p. 8).

READING COMPONENT	INSTRUCTION
Alphabeticity	“...can be taught to using direct and explicit instruction in phonemic awareness (PA) and word analysis (WA). This research finding is supported by a much larger body of research with children indicating that effective alphabeticity instruction includes systematically teaching letter-sound correspondences directly and explicitly.”
Fluency	“...can be improved using repeated readings of texts, or reading the same text multiple times. This finding is also supported by a much larger body of research with adolescents and children that finds that guided, repeated oral reading of passages of text is the most effective approach to teaching fluency.”

READING COMPONENT	INSTRUCTION
Vocabulary	...can be improved "through instruction and that effective instruction includes the opportunity to use new words many times and to process them deeply. Research with children supports and extends this finding. K–12 research finds that effective vocabulary instruction includes active engagement during instruction, repetition, and the use of multiple contexts, and listening and wide reading that increases exposure to new concepts."
Comprehension	...can be improved using specific strategies such "direct reading comprehension strategy instruction, instruction in multiple components of reading and enabling instruction or settings (such as providing aides for teachers)... The larger body of research with children, both native and non-native speakers, supports and extends these findings. K–12 research has identified additional strategies that are effective, including the use of graphic organizers, the use of story structure and cooperative learning."

In parallel, the NRC has identified principles for instruction related to developing each of these four components of reading (see NRC 2012a, 2012c). The following is a summary of these principles:

- Use explicit and systematic reading instruction to develop the major components of reading according to the assessed needs of individual learners;
- Combine explicit and systematic instruction with extended reading practice to help learners acquire and transfer component-reading skills;
- Motivate learning through learners' engagement with the literacy tasks used for instruction and extensive reading practice;
- Develop reading fluency to facilitate efficient reading of words and longer text;
- Explicitly teach the structure of written language to facilitate decoding and comprehension;
- To develop vocabulary, use a mixture of instructional approaches combined with extensive reading of texts to create an enriched verbal environment;
- 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.

Resources

- Kruidenier. (2002). *Research-based Principals for Adult Basic Education Reading Instruction*. lincs.ed.gov/publications/pdf/adult_ed_02.pdf.
- Chapter 6 to 9 in Kruidenier et al. (2010). *Adult Education Literacy Instruction: A Review of the Research*. files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED521229.pdf.
- Chapter 4: Principles of Learning for Instructional Design. NRC. (2012a). *Improving Adult Literacy Instruction: Options for Practice and Research*. doi.org/10.17226/13469.
- NRC. (2012c). *Improving Adult Literacy Instruction: Developing Reading and Writing*. doi.org/10.17226/13468.

Motivating learners

Another key theme emerging out of the literature on adult reading instruction is the importance of motivating adult learners to persist in their studies. This is identified as “one of the most challenging aspects of designing effective adult literacy programs” as improving literacy skills requires hundreds of hours of practice. However, due to competing demands and other realities adults face, “the average duration of participation in literacy programs is nowhere close to what is needed” (NRC 2021a, p. 130).

Drawing from multiple disciplines, including psychology and sociology, the NRC report details design principles that support adults’ persistence in developing literacy given current research. The following is a summary list of these design principles:

- Develop self-efficacy and perceptions of competency;
- Help learners set appropriate and valuable learning goals;
- Set expectations about the amount of effort and practice required to develop literacy skills;
- Help learners develop feelings of control and autonomy;
- Foster interest and develop beliefs about the value of literacy tasks;
- Help learners monitor progress and regulate their behavior toward goal attainment;
- Teach students to make adaptive attributions for successes and failures;
- Provide learners with opportunities for success while providing optimal challenges to develop proficiencies;
- Foster social relationships and interactions known to affect learning;
- Use classroom structures and select texts and materials to help learners identify with learning and literacy tasks that counter past negative experiences with schooling;
- Assist with removing barriers to participation and practice to ensure that learners have the motivating experience of making progress;
- Give learners access to knowledgeable and skilled teachers and appropriately designed materials.

Key to promoting motivation is ensuring that reading instruction is relevant and contextualized to the learner. This was evident in SRDC’s 2014 research project testing the effectiveness of workplace literacy and essential skills (LES) training. It found that one of the keys to success in terms of effectiveness is “curricula that embeds LES training in a performance and business needs framework that is highly relevant to learners’ job tasks and employers’ business priorities” (SRDC 2014, p. 25).

Resources

- Chapter 5: Motivation, Engagement, and Persistence in NRC. (2012a). *Improving Adult Literacy Instruction: Options for Practice and Research*. doi.org/10.17226/13469.
- NRC. (2012b). *Improving Adult Literacy Instruction: Supporting Learning and Motivation*. doi.org/10.17226/13469.
- SRDC. (2014). *UPSKILL: A Credible Test of Workplace Literacy and Essential Skills Training*. www.srdc.org/media/199770/upskill-final-results-es-en.pdf.

ASSESSMENT OF READING SKILLS

One of the central themes in the review of the literature considers the importance of assessment, and, in particular, the assessment of the four components of reading (alphabeticity, fluency, vocabulary and comprehension).

A well-defined best practice is individualized diagnostic assessments to determine reading levels and instructional priorities. Assessments over time also helps to determine whether a program of instruction has been effective. Adult reading

instruction research show that adults can have difficulties with any of the components of reading. One of the stronger principles identified in the literature is that “assessing each component of reading in order to generate profiles of students’ reading ability gives teachers much more instructionally relevant information than any test of a single component can” (Kruidenier et al 2010, p.8).

These assessment profiles provide “a comprehensive view of learners strengths and needs across many aspects of the reading process and can be used to design a program of instruction that addresses all aspects of the reading process” (Kruidenier et al 2010, p. 35).

With there being such a wide range of adult education learning groups, there is greater variability of adult learner profiles compared to that of child learners. That said, the research suggests that there are groups of adult education learners with distinct reading assessment profile that can, in turn, help teachers design instruction more efficiently and effectively. Distinct profiles have been developed for each of the major adult education groups, including those in Adult Basic Education (ABE), Adult Secondary Education (ASE), English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL), and those with reading disability.

Further focus considers specifics approaches and methods in carrying out assessments. Relative to many of the other essential skills, reading has “a rich body of national and international research to support the development of assessment, with established psychometric properties as well as learning materials to guide skills development, each of which have been applied in a broad range of settings” (SRDC 2021, p. 39).

Resources

- Chapter 5: Reading Assessment Profiles in Kruidenier et al. (2010). *Adult Education Literacy Instruction: A Review of the Research*. files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED521229.pdf.
- See Conclusion 6, p. 246, in NRC. (2012a). *Improving Adult Literacy Instruction: Options for Practice and Research*. doi.org/10.17226/13469.

- SRDC. (2021). *To Support the Launch of Skills for Success* (DRAFT).
- SRDC. (2018). *A Comprehensive Review and Development of Measurement Options for Essential Skills Initiatives*. www.srdc.org/media/553000/oles-measurement-phase-1-report.pdf.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR TEACHING AND ASSESSING READING SKILLS

One of the key challenges associated with teaching literacy skills to adult learners is motivation, as improving reading is a lengthy and arduous task for many. As such, instructors may face difficulties in designing a learning plan targeting reading skills that can provide the intensive and prolonged approach that their students often require.

Given the heterogeneity of learners’ backgrounds and experiences, instructors are encouraged to design learning plans that are contextualized and can be adapted to individualized reading levels, workplace needs and language fluency.

Adult learners cannot be treated as a monolithic category. However, even within sub-groups, the realities of individuals vary dramatically in what they need to become proficient readers in English. Effective teaching requires an understanding of these realities and literacy instruction that is tailored to the learner. “The population of adult learners is heterogeneous. Optimal reading and writing instruction will therefore vary according to goals for literacy development and learning, knowledge and skill, interests, neurocognitive profiles, and cultural and linguistic backgrounds” (NRC 2012a, p. 256).

Resources

- Center for Adult English Language Acquisition (CAELA). (2012). *How should adult ESL reading instruction differ from ABE reading instruction?* www.cal.org/caela/esl_resources/briefs/readingdif.pdf.

- Schwarzer. (2009). *Best practices for teaching the whole adult ESL learner*. www.researchgate.net/publication/227837518_Best_practices_for_teaching_the_whole_adult_ESL_learner.
- Chapter 4: Introduction to ESOL and Writing Topics in Kruidenier et al. (2010). *Adult Education Literacy Instruction: A Review of the Research*. files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED521229.pdf.
- Chapter 7: Learning, Reading, and Writing Disabilities in NRC. (2012). *Improving Adult Literacy Instruction: Options for Practice and Research*. doi.org/10.17226/13469.
- Chapter 8: Language and Literacy Development of English Language Learners in NRC. (2012). *Improving Adult Literacy Instruction: Options for Practice and Research*. doi.org/10.17226/13469.

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- National Research Council. (2012b). *Improving Adult Literacy Instruction: Supporting Learning and Motivation*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/13469>.
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