# Teaching Emergent Adult Readers: Five Strategies

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## Background

In *How Should Adult Reading Instruction Differ from ABE Reading Instruction?,* Burt, Peyton, and Van Duzer (2005) reviewed the research base on teaching reading to adult English learners. Using the components of vocabulary, alphabetics and word analysis, fluency, and comprehension, the authors highlighted areas where the differences in needs and background of adult English learners (EL) and native English speaking learners might suggest using different instructional strategies at opportune times. Since 2005, more research has been conducted both with adult native speakers of English learning to read in English and with adult immigrant or non-native English speakers learning to read in English.

Using the recent research, this article updates and enhances the 2005 brief as follows: It reviews and refines the description of reading components; describes five evidence-based strategies for teaching adult learners to read in English, highlighting special considerations for working with non-native English speakers depending on their educational backgrounds, length of time in the United States, and literacy in other languages; and suggests areas for further research.

## Reading Components

According to the National Research Council (2012a, b), reading involves a set of integrated components. Successful readers are able to incorporate word level components (bottom-up) with sentence and text level components (top-down) to make meaning from text. Birch (2002) describes these as "language processing strategies" and "cognitive processing strategies." These strategies exist along a continuum and must be applied skillfully. In other words, to become a good reader, one must employ the strategies, not in a specific order, but as needed depending on the text.

Decoding: The first language processing strategy is decoding (referred to as alphabetics and word analysis by Burt, Peyton, and Van Duzer [2005]), which is the process of using the written letters in an alphabet to represent meaningful spoken language. Decoding includes both phonemic awareness and word analysis. Phonemic awareness is the knowledge of the basic sounds (phonemes) of spoken language. Word analysis is the knowledge of the connection between written letters or letter combinations and the sounds they represent.

To be able to decode in English, knowledge of both phonemes and morphemes is necessary. Morphemes are the smallest unit of meaning in words. For example, the word "houses" consists of two morphemes, *house* + *s*. Morphological awareness is the understanding of how word parts, such as prefixes, roots, and suffixes combine to make and change words.

Morphologically complex words can be *inflected* or *derived.* Inflected morphemes are units such as the final *-s* in house, which changes the quantity of a word, or *-ed,* which, when added to the end of a verb, such as *paint,* changes the verb tense from present to past.

Derived morphemes are units such as the *-ly* in *slowly,* which changes the part of speech of a word, or the *un-* in *unhappy,* which changes the meaning.

Vocabulary: Building on decoding, a reader recognizes familiar words, and matches them to his or her existing vocabulary. Vocabulary refers to the words that a person knows, both receptively, and productively. Vocabulary skills include knowing the pronunciation of a word, its part of speech, multiple meanings, and words it often links to.

Fluency: As readers become more proficient in language processing strategies, they can begin to build fluency, which is the ability to read easily and accurately with appropriate rhythm, intonation, and expression. When interacting with texts, a fluent reader does more than decoding in that the reader is not just identifying individual words, but longer units, such as phrases or whole sentences (Kuhn, Schwanenflugel, & Meisinger, 2010). Because fluent readers expend less energy to follow the individual words on the page, they are able to employ a larger range of cognitive processing strategies rather than relying solely on language processing strategies. They typically read between 240 and 600 words per minute (Christodoulou et al., 2014); reading at a rate below this results in reduced comprehension (Nielsen, 2005).

Comprehension: As language processing strategies become more automatic and more attention can be focused on cognitive processing strategies, readers become more skillful at constructing meaning from the text, which is generally referred to as reading comprehension. To fully comprehend the written text, expert readers combine their language processing and cognitive processing skills with background content knowledge and reading strategies.

Other research has focused not on the components of how readers read, but on how teachers can help learners to become better readers. These studies have described five strategies that address skills across the reading continuum. They are described below, in general order from bottom-up to top-down processing strategies, though they often straddle both types of skills.

**Five Evidence-based Strategies**

1. Teach morphological strategies as well as decoding

Although both phonemic awareness and morphological processing are key to *decoding,* morphological awareness alone is the distinguishing factor between skilled and less skilled *reading comprehension* ability (To, Tighe, & Binder, 2014). This is true for all learners, both native and non-native speakers of English.

Children learning to read in English either as a first or second language quickly acquire the inflectional morphemes (Carlisle, 2003). However, the order of acquisition for learning to read in a second language as an *adult* places these morphemes well at the later stages of language learning (Lightbown & Spada, 2012). Morphemes such as the “s” at the end of the phrase “the

two dogs" may not be noticed unless explicitly taught, especially by those adult learners whose native language does not include such markers. Even in languages such as Spanish that do use the inflectional "-s," it is often dropped in oral reading. This may be because it is judged to be redundant information. In fact, this tendency has been noted in adult native speakers in adult basic education (ABE) classes as well, suggesting that information deemed non-essential or redundant may be omitted by emerging readers, and thus needs to be taught explicitly to all learners (National Research Council, 2012a).

Morphological processing may be especially difficult for adult ELs learning to read in English, as they often view vocabulary development as an exercise in memory rather than in word analysis; they tend to rely more on lexical storage – memorization – of words than on word analysis skills (Clahsen, Felser, Newbauer, Sato, & Silva 2011; Herman, Cote, Reilly, & Binder, 2013). For example, while readers might know the word *happy,* they might not know *unhappy*, or if they do know the word, it is from memory, not from an understanding that "un" is a morpheme that means "not" when placed in the front of another morpheme. Similarly, they might not realize that *happiness* it is related to the word *happy*. Not understanding these connections puts an unnecessary strain on the lexical memory of the students, requiring them to remember many words as discrete units, rather than understanding patterns.

Recent studies have shown that reading comprehension and performance improved, especially for non-native speakers, when derivational morphology strategies were taught (Alamprese, MacArthur, Price, & Knight, 2011; Herman et al., 2013; To, Tighe, & Binder, 2014). Instructors may further help learners by using linguistic terms such as "morpheme," "prefix" and "suffix," because adult learners, especially non-native speakers, want to know how English works and appreciate knowing the terms (Alamprese et al., 2011). In fact, many adult ELs have a strong academic background and may be familiar with these terms already from previous study of English as a foreign language. Or, if their native language has similar features, learners may be able to transfer their knowledge of these features in the native language.

Research on children learning to read in English as a second language (e.g., August, Carlo, Dressler, & Snow, 2005) suggests that using first language knowledge of morphology can help students acquire morphological awareness in the second language. This is especially true when the student's first language is a similar to the second, as in Spanish which has affixes similar to those of English. For example, the English suffix "-tion" is similar to the Spanish suffix "-ción." Pointing this out to adult students can help increase morphological awareness, and hence vocabulary acquisition and reading comprehension (Kieffer & Lesaux, 2008).

Given the complexity of the language and the limited time available to learn, how can a teacher choose which prefixes and suffixes to teach? It is recommended that all learners, but especially English learners and those with learning disabilities, first learn the most common and salient derivational affixes, such as *un-* and *-ness* (Moats, 2011).

2. Provide lots of meaningful practice with vocabulary

In order to build reading fluency, readers must have a large repository of vocabulary that they can easily access. Knowing a word deeply means knowing how to say and spell the word; how it

breaks into parts and what the parts mean (roots, prefixes, suffixes, parts of speech); how it might mean something different in different contexts; and how it combines or collocates with other words. For example, where it is possible to *take out the trash* or *take out the garbage*, and it is possible to speak of a garbage can or a trash can, a player can make *trash talk* on the court, but he is unlikely to make *garbage talk*. While native speakers are more likely to be familiar with how meaning varies in context, or recognize collocations, they may still need explicit instruction in morphology and parts of speech, such as recognizing when, where, and how words change depending on their context.

Determining the meaning of a word from its context is a reading strategy recommended by many experts (see, for example, Curtis & Kruidenier, 2005; National Research Council, 2012b). There are often difficulties, however, in using this strategy with non-native English speakers: To determine the meaning of a word from the context it is in, the reader must understand 98% of the surrounding words (Nation, 2005), and in order to read independently a reader must have a vocabulary of at least 3,000 (National Research Council, 2012a). Furthermore, even if the learner can determine the meaning from the context, knowledge of the word may be quite superficial rather than deep (Eskey, 2005). Native English speakers may be similarly limited when it comes to written vocabulary, but they are likely to have a better oral vocabulary in English. Strategy #3, discussed below, provides examples on using learners' knowledge of oral language as well as their background experiences to build their literacy skills.

Non-native speakers of English may be at a disadvantage when it comes to both written and oral vocabulary. While a vocabulary of at least 9,000 words is required to be able to read college-level texts, adult English learners may only know 2,000-7,000 words when beginning academic study (Zareva, Schwanenflugel, & Niklova, 2005). Interestingly, ELs who have been in the United States for years or who have attended a U.S. high school may be more similar to native speakers than to non-native speakers in oral vocabulary development (Alamprese, 2009), and hence may be able to draw upon their English oral skills in improving their English literacy skills more easily than other adult English learners.

In light of the challenges that ELs may face in acquiring new vocabulary, it is recommended that instructors do the following:

- Limit new word presentation to no more than 10 or so new words at a time (Baker et al., 2014).
- Provide context for the new vocabulary and multiple exposures to new words in a variety of contexts (Nation, 2005).
- Provide exposure to the different ways a word may appear in different contexts, or transform according to the context.
- Allow students to use both bilingual and monolingual dictionaries. Non-native English students need at least a 2,000 word vocabulary to be able to use a monolingual learner's dictionary effectively, and basic level students may not know that many words. To enable learners to truly benefit from using dictionaries, teach them dictionary skills such as finding a word by guide words, understanding the abbreviations that indicate parts of speech, using the pronunciation guide, and so on (National Center for Family Literacy & Center for Applied Linguistics, 2008).

For additional suggestions for building ELs' vocabulary, see Burt, Peyton, & Van Duzer, 2005.

3. Look at the whole as well as the parts

Learners often build bottom-up decoding and language skills before developing cognitive skills that allow them to apply their background knowledge and experiences to text as they interpret it for reading comprehension. In recent years, several successful instructional strategies have been employed to help learners transition from using language processing only to using cognitive processing strategies as well. These strategies allow learners to contribute their language knowledge, which may be at a word or phrase level, to a larger topic or experience, and directly illustrate for them the use of their language in an authentic context.

Instruction with English learners with emerging literacy has recently focused on an approach that combines both top-down and bottom-up activities known as "whole-part-whole" (WPW). In this approach, the class explores a topic of importance and interest to the learners, such as jobs in the United States or dreams for the future. Ideas, phrases, and words might be brainstormed on the topic, with the teacher providing vocabulary as needed. Then students read an article about the topic. Next, instruction focuses on specific language components such as sound/symbol correspondences or morphological features taken from the reading. In the end, the class returns to the "whole" again, to write a story about their dreams for the future or to reread the article and talk about it with a partner, for example (Trupke-Bastidas & Poulos, 2007).

Vinogradov (2010) cites another example of WPW often used with emerging readers, the Language Experience Approach (LEA). In LEA, the students and the instructor share an experience – such as going on a field trip to the library, or planting seeds in the classroom. The teacher leads the students in an oral recounting of the event, in groups, pairs, or with the whole class as appropriate. The teacher transcribes what the students say. Then, multiple activities focusing on a given language aspect can follow. For example, the class may do exercises with vocabulary and with morphological or grammar structures, from the writing. In the last step, students return to the whole, as they re-read their story in groups, write new stories, or, if the reading lends itself to it, do a reader's theatre activity where they construct a dialog from the story.

As discussed above, both native speakers and English learners with emerging literacy may have oral vocabulary superior to their written vocabulary. In LEA, this oral strength is used to gauge what a student already knows about a topic while building more knowledge. It also integrates all skills—reading, writing, listening, and speaking—as they are integrated in real life. Finally, these real life experiences help learners build their background knowledge of systems in the United States, something that will be key to comprehension of other materials and information.

4. Teach metacognitive reading strategies to comprehend words and passages/determine word and passage meanings

Not surprisingly, adult learners, especially those at the beginning levels, may believe that they need to understand every word in a text to truly comprehend it. Their first encounter with an unfamiliar word may stop them from comprehending—or even reading—the whole passage. In a

rare experimental study with adult English language learners (Huang & Newbern, 2012), non-native English speakers from high beginning to high intermediate level were taught five explicit strategies for reading comprehension:

1. Highlight important information
2. Preview texts for main idea and look at titles, heading, and photos/pictures
3. Reread selected content
4. Guess meaning of unfamiliar words
5. Apply prior knowledge

The group that was taught explicit reading strategies achieved better outcomes in their reading comprehension than did the control group who did not receive this instruction. Interviews with the students revealed that highlighting important information was their favorite strategy as well as rereading selected content. Although the *n* was very small (18-22 in each group), this study suggests that direct instruction in reading strategies can benefit all adult readers. Furthermore, it follows the adult learning principle posited by Knowles, Holton, & Swanson (2005) of giving students some control over their ongoing learning: As learners highlight what they think is important, re-read, and take notes on what they read, they are involved actively in their own learning.

5. Use real or authentic reading materials as much as possible

Reading skill development for students with very basic levels of English literacy takes thousands of hours (National Research Council, 2012a). Yet nationally, learners in adult basic education (ABE) programs attend classes for fewer than 100 hours per program year (Tamassia, Lennon, Yamamoto, & Kirsch, 2007). Given this limitation on the number of hours of instruction provided in most ABE programs, adults need to be engaged in their learning in order to continue attending class and engaging with print and digital literacy outside of class. In a longitudinal study of adult learner persistence in ABE programs, Reder and Bynner (2009) observed a positive relationship between attendance in literacy programs and increased literacy activity outside of the classroom: Those who attended more hours engaged in more literacy activities outside of class such as reading online than those who did not. The researchers also found that, over time, this increased activity led to increased skills.

English learners typically attend more hours of instruction than do native English speakers (Greenberg, Wise, Morris, Frederick, Rodrigo, Nanda, & Pae, 2011**)**. This may be due, in part, to the fact that ESL instructors often utilize authentic materials and genuine tasks that English learners see as relevant to their lives (Condelli, Yoon, & Wrigley, 2009; Purcell-Gates, Degener, Jacobson, & Soler, 2002). In reporting on an intervention study with native speakers in ABE classes, Perin and Greenberg (2007) noted a small increase in reading skills with adult learners who received explicit instruction in the reading components in the Orton-Gillingham children's reading improvement program. The authors posited that, if the teachers had used age-appropriate authentic materials in addition to explicit instruction in reading components, this might have increased the learning gains shown by the students. Using age-appropriate readings about topics of importance to adults may also help students to transfer literacy practices to other contexts (National Research Council, 2012a).

Task-based instruction, an integration of explicit instruction with implicit instruction in which the student uses authentic language to solve a "real" problem or answer a question, has been promoted in the literature on second language instruction for some time (Long & Doughty, 2011; National Research Council, 2012a). In task-based instruction, language is learned through written or oral communications that occur when students are given actual tasks to accomplish that are relevant to their needs and goals (Condelli, Wrigley, & Yoon, 2009). These tasks might be, for example, reading various schedules online or in print to find the quickest mode of transportation to get somewhere, or reading a technical manual related to the learner's job to find out how to start a machine. Tasks can also be based on a WPW topic or a LEA the class has previously participated in.

## A Final Consideration

When planning reading instruction for adult learners, consider who the learners are, what languages they speak, and what their educational experience has been to date. A study with 144 non-academic English learners (Ro & Ryu, 2013) showed that the length of time studying English, the learners' self-evaluation of reading ability, and their education level were the best predictors of their reading and writing scores. On a related note, Weiqiang (2011) reviewed the research on the effects of bilingualism on learning a third language and summarized that knowing two or more languages already would positively affect the ease of acquiring phonological and lexical skills in the third language. The lesson for instructors here is that knowing the learners' language backgrounds can guide instructors as they plan instruction to meet the needs of all their learners.

## Conclusion

Recent research has shown that adult readers benefit from both explicit instruction in the reading components and meaning-based, or implicit, instruction. Instruction in vocabulary and its morphology is especially useful in improving reading, especially with non-native English speakers. As vocabulary grows, instruction can expand from the word to the text level and beyond, as learners move toward using more cognitive processing strategies than language processing strategies.

Because so much time and practice is needed to become a fluent reader and the hours of instruction available in ABE/ESL programs are so limited, instruction should focus on topics of importance to the learners, and include practice with multiple activities that integrate listening-speaking and reading-writing skills. The use of authentic materials helps with the transfer of learning and also increases learner engagement, which may increase persistence and lead to better reading outcomes.

The number of adult students in the research studies conducted to date is quite small, and there have been few longitudinal studies. More research with more participants over more time is needed. Topics for further research include the importance of teacher expertise in improving student performance; the impact of oral vocabulary on learning to read; and the effects of language background, previous education, and self-directed individual practice, perhaps online, with adult learners.

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