
**Introduction**

A growing awareness of literacy issues among adult learners has spawned many responses in educational programmes, including the embedding of these skills into existing courses. Embedding literacy teaching is now integral to most low-level courses in New Zealand tertiary education as well as many training programmes.

A parallel development occurring in many educational contexts is that of basing teaching practices on research findings. While this approach has long been standard in fields such as health and engineering, it has only become a serious consideration in education over the past decade, especially in the schooling sector. This approach has been made possible by the work of educational researchers using large-scale meta-analyses of research (Hattie, 2009, 2011).

This article looks at how trainers can include research-based strategies for teaching literacy skills. It is acknowledged that trainers in these courses can’t realistically provide intensive literacy teaching, but they can still minimise learners’ literacy difficulties and maximise their learning by incorporating strategies for learners to access the teaching content more readily. Neither is it expected that trainers would necessarily adopt all of these strategies; they are offered in the hope that trainers will experiment with them in their teaching, gradually adding them to their teaching repertoire.

**Research base**

While there is still only a small body of quality research about the teaching of adult literacy relative to other educational sectors, there is still a growing base of studies that can inform our teaching. I have drawn material for this article from three main sources (Brooks, Burton, Cole, & Szczerbinski, 2007; Kruidenier, MacArthur, & Wrigley, 2010; McShane, 2005).

It is important to understand that the strategies being put forward are based on high-quality research evidence; they are not just ‘good ideas’ or based on what someone believes is successful. They come out of reputable research studies where there has been a demonstrable gain in reading skills either compared with other strategies or against control groups. Using these findings to guide our teaching is what it means to be ‘research-based’ and therefore more effective than working from hearsay.

There are undoubtedly additional effective ways to teach literacy that have not been researched to date and could be included at a future point. It is not that these other strategies are any less effective, it is just that the research evidence is not available to demonstrate their effectiveness as yet.

**Limitations**

I am aware of the very real constraints that operate in training courses of short duration (both in terms of time and the pressure to cover the subject material) and therefore the degree of impact that can be achieved in these situations. It is unlikely for example that learners with low-level reading skills will make much progress under these circumstances. There are also limitations on what reading skill components can be realistically taught in these courses.
Effective generic teaching strategies

Much of the teaching of literacy skills involves strategies that are common to any teaching situation, whether they explicitly identify literacy or not. It is important therefore to reflect good adult teaching strategies as well as those specific to the teaching of literacy.

- **Explicit instruction** (also known as Deliberate Acts of Teaching)
  - Make goals, lesson objectives, activities, and expectations clear
  - Make connections between lesson activities and broader skill goals
  - Address background knowledge and pre-requisite skills
  - Explain and model all aspects of the task
  - Assume nothing and leave nothing to chance

- **Strategy instruction**
  - Teach learning tools: principles, rules, or multi-step processes to accomplish learning tasks
  - Model and demonstrate; prompt and cue learners to use strategies

- **Scaffolded instruction**
  - Provide supports for learning as needed: breaking into steps, providing clues, reminders, or encouragement
  - Withdraw support gradually as it becomes less necessary

- **Intensive instruction or active engagement**
  - Keep learners focused, active, and responding
  - Provide plenty of ‘time on task’

- **Structured or segmented instruction**
  - Break information and skills into manageable parts
  - Teach parts systematically and in sequence
  - Bring the parts together to re-focus on the whole

Other elements to consider include:

- Providing frequent, realistic and immediate feedback
- Working in pairs or small groups rather than relying heavily on learners working alone
- Achieving high rates of attendance – learners need to be present in order to learn!
- Contextualising the teaching content to learners’ interests, immediate concerns and work environments
- Being aware of learners’ previous educational experience – they may not have been successful, especially at school
- Consider that learners may be ‘rusty learners’ who have not done anything educational since they left school – they may well be apprehensive and take some encouragement to become involved and gain confidence in their learning skills.
- Seeking a good balance between supporting and challenging learners – both are needed, but need to be used appropriately.
- Set follow-up work to be done before the next teaching session – this helps increase the amount of learning in addition to the face-to-face time. This work should help consolidate new learning by practising and not be too daunting.
• Ensure that all learners receive a fair degree of attention.

Reading material should be:

• Related to the learners’ work context, their particular work roles and tasks
• Of an appropriate reading level (without being condescending)
• Of reasonable print quality and font size
• Supplemented by diagrams and other visual material where appropriate.

Teaching the key reading components

1. Alphabetics including phonemic awareness and decoding training

Given the time constraints of training courses and the fact that most learners who need this type of reading instruction will have limited skills, it is unlikely that teachers will be able to do much of this component on their course – it is therefore not given any detailed consideration here.

One strategy for helping with decoding an unknown word is:

• Step 1: read to the end of the sentence again and think of a word that makes sense.
• Step 2: If still unknown, identify the initial sound of the unknown word - ‘what word beginning with that sound would make sense in the sentence?’

Anyone interested in exploring this component should read Chapter 4 of McShane’s book).

2. Fluency

Fluent reading is rapid, efficient, and largely free of errors in word identification. But fluency is more than speedy, accurate word reading; a fluent reader also uses appropriate phrasing and expression. Fluent reading sounds like speech.

Fluency is required for comprehension. At a minimum, accurate and efficient word reading is necessary. Comprehension suffers when poor readers must focus on “getting the words off the page” and therefore aren’t able to give much attention to the meaning of what they are reading. In contrast, fluent readers are able to focus on meaning because for them, decoding is automatic and effortless.

Research suggests that guided repeated oral reading may improve one or more aspects of fluency as well as comprehension. These approaches call for the learner to read a passage several times, with guidance, until an acceptable level of fluency is reached, at which point she begins work on another passage at the same or a slightly higher level of difficulty. Guidance may involve any of the following:

• Modeling – either by the teacher or off a tape-recorder
• Simultaneous reading by the teacher and learner(s)
• Assistance and correction by the teacher (to maintain the momentum of reading).

3. Vocabulary development
Vocabulary refers to knowledge of word meanings. Oral vocabulary is the words we can use and understand in speaking and listening and reading vocabulary is the store of words we recognise and understand in print.

Oral vocabulary is a key to early literacy development, and reading vocabulary is a crucial component of reading comprehension at all levels. For these reasons vocabulary has been described as “occupying an important middle ground in learning to read.”

Ways to develop learners’ vocabulary include:

- Pre-teach words in the text being taught. Teaching the meaning of those words before the learners read the text improves comprehension of the material and builds vocabulary.
- Ensure multiple exposures to new words. To be sure learners encounter new words frequently, teach vocabulary they will use.
- Keep learners actively engaged. Be sure they use the new words they are learning.
- Teach word-learning strategies. Give learners tools for discovering the meanings of words they encounter during independent reading.
  - Introduce common prefixes and suffixes (e.g., un, post, ful, ly) and demonstrate how they alter the meaning and function of base words.
  - Teach specific strategies for using context clues to derive the meaning of unknown words (e.g., noticing a definition or explanation following the word and set off by commas).
  - Teach learners how to use a dictionary.

**Indirect approaches to word learning**

Encourage wide reading in varied subject matter areas. Vocabulary is often acquired indirectly through reading. The context of an unknown word provides many clues to meaning. Be sure, though, that the reading material is not too difficult. If a text has too many unknown words, the reader will not have enough context clues.

**Choosing words to teach**

For direct instruction in general vocabulary, you might decide to teach several new words each session, perhaps choosing especially useful or difficult words.

- **Useful words:**
  - *Signal words* and phrases that mark relationships between ideas and information, like *therefore, however, despite*
  - Idiomatic expressions, like *straight from the horse’s mouth*
  - Words in the news (select words used in company newsletters)
  - Technical terms related to the workplace context.

- **Difficult words:**
  - Homophones (words that sound the same but have different spellings and meanings), e.g., brake and break
  - Homographs (words that look the same but have different meanings), e.g., bear: animal, support or carry and tolerate.

**4. Comprehension strategies**
Comprehension is the ultimate goal of the reading process. Although there is considerable debate about what comprehension involves, it is essentially about ‘taking meaning from the written text’.

Comprehension requires active, strategic thinking, but it also requires basic reading skills: decoding (word identification), fluency, and vocabulary (knowledge of word meanings). Unless decoding is automatic and reading is fluent, comprehension suffers. So another way to understand the reading process is to see it as a hierarchy of skills. Beginning with letters and sounds, moving to identification of words, fluent use of those skills, and understanding of the meaning of words and sentences, comprehension is the culmination of a series of processes.

All adult readers, regardless of their reading level, can benefit from comprehension-strategy instruction. Meaningful reading, including practice of important comprehension strategies, should be part of every training session for all adult learners.

Ways to teach comprehension strategies include:

- Comprehension monitoring – check out what learners understand by periodically asking them to re-state what’s been read in their own words
- Graphic organisers – using diagrams to show/summarise key understandings in the text
- Story structure – analysing a text by asking key questions such as Who/Where/What/How?
- Question answering – asking questions to check understanding – not only simple recall (‘how many reports are required?’), but also more evaluative ones (‘what makes a good report?’)
- Question generating – teach learners to ask their own questions about the text
- Summarising key or main ideas.

Discussion among learners is central to many comprehension strategies.

Also remember that the ‘learners need to do the work’ – teachers constantly answering their own questions is a disservice to active learning.

While these suggestions are by no means exhaustive, they do provide a useful start for trainers wanting to grapple with literacy issues in their teaching.

References


